Aurora Leigh

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Elizabeth Barrett was born in County Durham, England, the eldest of 12 children and a distant cousin of the literary patron John Kenyon. She took an early interest in poetry and also developed health issues at a young age, including headaches and spinal pain that would recur throughout her life. She published her first adult collection of poetry in 1838 and wrote prolifically in the following years. In 1844, she published *Poems*, which earned the admiration of fellow poet Robert Browning. Elizabeth Barrett would eventually marry him, over the objections of her father, who disowned her. On both sides, Barrett Browning's family profited from the slave trade and the sugar industry in Jamaica, although she herself would become politically active in the abolition movement and also the movement to regulate child labor. Barrett Browning published what is perhaps her best-known and most ambitious long work, *Aurora Leigh*, in 1856, a few years before her death in Italy. Although Barrett Browning's work was popular in her lifetime, much of it went out of print shortly after, only to be rediscovered later in the 1970s by feminist literary critics who helped contribute to Barrett Browning's current reputation as one of the foremost poets of her era.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The character of *Aurora Leigh* wants to write an epic about her own time period, believing that every poet probably finds their own age commonplace but is able to turn it into epic poetry regardless. In many ways, this ambition is also true of Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself, who sets her long poem *Aurora Leigh* in more or less Barrett Browning's present and in places that Barrett Browning herself traveled and lived. At the time of *Aurora Leigh*'s publication, there were examples of women who had become successful as writers—Barrett Browning wrote after Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*) and at about the same time as the Brontë sisters (whose works include *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë). These women were outnumbered by men and sometimes dismissed by critics, but they and Barrett Browning represent how the literary landscape was tentatively changing to incorporate more women. Still, despite her popularity in her lifetime, Barrett Browning's work was relatively ignored during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was only due to renewed interest in the 1970s and 1980s, during what is often called the second wave of feminism, that Barrett Browning once again rose to prominence, with new editions of her work being published. Today, Barrett Browning herself is often considered part of the first wave of modern feminism, a period that begins roughly around the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and included issues like women's suffrage.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Aurora Leigh is a long poem that is partly inspired by the Greek and Roman epics that the character Aurora reads in the book. These include *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (by Homer) as well as *The Aeneid* (by Virgil). Some of the most famous examples of long epic poems in English include *Paradise Lost* by John Milton and *The Dunciad* by Alexander Pope, both of which may also have been an influence on Barrett Browning and her desire to write epic poetry in English. In its book-length poetic structure, *Aurora Leigh* also has some similarities to Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, another Romantic-era novel in verse. Notably, *Aurora Leigh* has a less rigid poetic structure than any of these other poems, making it a precursor to modernist poetry, which is less likely to contain rhymes and regular poetic meters. Barrett Browning's works are also often paired with the work of her husband, Robert Browning, whose poetic career features several book-length poems, including *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*. In terms of philosophy and politics, Barrett Browning cited Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, one of the first modern feminist texts, as being a major influence on her own ideas about feminism. Of Barrett Browning's many literary followers, two of the most prominent are Edgar Allan Poe ("The Raven") and Emily Dickinson, who each modeled aspects of their own poetry on Barrett Browning's example.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Aurora Leigh
- **When Written:** 1851–1856
- **Where Written:** Florence, Italy
- **When Published:** 1856
- **Literary Period:** Romanticism
- **Genre:** Verse Novel
- **Setting:** Florence, Italy; England; and Paris, France
- **Climax:** Romney comes to Italy, and Aurora admits she loves him.
- **Antagonist:** Lady Waldemar, sexism
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

'Sup, Bro? All the children in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's family had nicknames. Hers was "Ba," while her brother Edward's nickname was "Bro."

Beautiful Ending. According to her husband, Robert, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's final word was "Beautiful."

PLOT SUMMARY

Aurora Leigh, the daughter of an English father and an Italian mother, lives in 19th-century Florence. When Aurora's mother dies, her father takes her to live in the mountains of the Italian countryside. Aurora has a happy childhood until one day when her father dies, leaving her with some final words of advice: "Love, my child."

Aurora is forced to go to England and live with her aunt in **Leigh Hall**, her family's property. Aurora's aunt is cold and rarely shows any form of affection to Aurora, making her miss the mountains of Italy. Still, she begins trying to make the best of life in England when she discovers some of her father's old **books**, which inspire Aurora to start on her own tentative attempts at making poetry.

Aurora's life in Leigh Hall is isolated, and initially she befriends her cousin Romney because he's one of the few visitors she ever sees. Still, over time they grow closer, and one morning Romney proposes marriage to Aurora. He does so in a way that Aurora finds condescending, however, and he talks dismissively about her artistic goals, believing that it isn't possible for a woman to be a good poet. Romney has lofty and arrogant ideas about how he can change the world through his social work. Aurora rejects the marriage proposal, to the frustration of her aunt, who informs Aurora that Romney is set to inherit all her father's money and Aurora will be poor if she doesn't marry him.

After the death of Aurora's aunt, Aurora refuses to accept money from Romney, deciding to go to London to try to make it as a poet on her own terms. Although she publishes some writing, she feels that her early publications are insignificant, and she believes that her true masterpiece will be a book-length poem.

Meanwhile, Romney gets deeper into his charity work, and this leads to him proposing to marry Marian Erle, a poor girl who was abused by her parents and is trying to make a new life for herself. The aristocratic Lady Waldemar breaks the news of Romney's impending marriage to Aurora, hoping that Aurora can help in Lady Waldemar's scheme to break up the marriage—so that Lady Waldemar can marry Romney herself. On the day of the planned wedding, Romney receives a letter on the altar from Marian about why she can't marry him. People at the wedding think that Romney has betrayed Marian and start attacking him.

All the while, Aurora struggles to write the type of poetry that she wants to, so she decides to go to her old home of Italy to seek inspiration. She sells the manuscript of a book-length poem, then heads to Paris.

While exploring Paris before heading to Italy, Aurora is shocked to see Marian, who disappeared after choosing not to marry Romney. Aurora is surprised to see that Marian is unmarried but has a child, and she accuses Marian of being promiscuous. But Marian explains the situation—Lady Waldemar convinced Marian that Romney could never really love her, and then one of Lady Waldemar's maids took Marian to Paris where she would be able to hide away. But before Marian knew what was happening, the maid took her to a brothel, and there Marian was raped and became pregnant. Marian struggled for a while to find shelter for her and her child before eventually finding work as a seamstress.

Aurora writes angrily to Lady Waldemar about Marian's situation. Aurora then offers for Marian and her child to come with her to Italy and live there. Marian gratefully accepts. Before they leave, Marian is surprised to learn in a letter that the manuscript she sold to pay for her trip to Italy has become a big success and that even critics who used to ignore her work are now talking about it. She wonders if perhaps the manuscript was a better piece of writing than she initially thought.

Aurora, Marian, and Marian's child make it to Italy, where several years pass. Aurora is happy to be part of a family unit but struggles to write the type of poetry she wants to. One day, Romney suddenly arrives in Italy, having learned about Aurora and Marian's whereabouts. Aurora is cordial but cold to Romney, believing that he is currently married to Lady Waldemar, which was the rumor going around. Romney says that he read and loved Aurora's book and he apologizes for how he condescended to her earlier. Romney has become less arrogant, in part because his grand scheme to turn Leigh Hall into a shelter for the poor ended with the house being burned down. Romney also suffered a period of severe illness and ended up blind.

Finally, Romney reveals that he is not married to Lady Waldemar after all. He is prepared to marry Marian and take in her child, since he promised to do this earlier, but Marian stops him, saying that as much as she admires Romney, she doesn't love him romantically.

Romney admits to Aurora that he still loves her and would still marry her if she'd accept him. Aurora confesses that she too loves Romney, even if she sometimes didn't admit it in the past. She realizes that pursuing a personal relationship doesn't have to come at the expense of her poetic work. Romney and Aurora embrace, and Aurora describes for Romney the Italian landscape that he can no longer see due to his blindness.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Aurora Leigh – Aurora Leigh is the daughter of an Italian mother and an English father who gets orphaned at a young age and is taken to live with her aunt in England. At first, she is disappointed about being separated from her beloved Italian countryside, but she learns to see the beauty in England, particularly after reading the old poetry **books** that her father left behind. Aurora becomes dedicated to the idea of one day creating a work of great poetry, despite the challenges that she faces in this profession as a woman, even from people like her cousin Romney. Aurora's passion for poetry is part of what leads her to reject Romney's marriage proposal, as she denies for many years that she loves Romney and works to succeed as a poet. But through getting to know Marian, Romney's former fiancée, and going back to her old home in Italy, Aurora realizes that as important as poetry is, it's also important to have love and close personal relationships. Aurora completes her character journey by both publishing a successful book and accepting Romney's love.

Romney Leigh – Romney is Aurora's cousin and a favorite of her aunt. He is devoted to trying to make the world a better place, sometimes to the point where he becomes delusional or self-righteous. When he and Aurora are young, he proposes to her in a condescending way, and she rejects him. Later, Romney gets into a relationship with Marian that seems to be based more on pity and charity than genuine love. After this relationship is broken up by the scheming of Lady Waldemar, Aurora assumes that Romney is taken in by Lady Waldemar, who pretends to share Romney's interest in social justice. In fact, however, while Aurora is away, Romney rejects Lady Waldemar and suffers further setbacks in his social work, like when his plans to turn **Leigh Hall** into a house for the poor end with the hall being burned down. Romney gets sick and becomes blind, representing the blindness he has exhibited in many parts of his life so far, but this gives him the clarity to once again seek out Aurora. Similar to Aurora's relationship to her poetry, Romney learns that he needs to balance his charity work with his personal relationships, and over the course of the poem, he also learns how to see Aurora as an equal and overcome some of his prejudices around women.

Marian Erle – Marian Erle is a lower-class young woman who runs away from her alcoholic father and abusive mother. While hospitalized, she meets Romney, who wants to marry her but does so from a place of pity and condescension rather than personal love. But in part due to the intervention of Lady Waldemar, the wedding never takes place, and Marian ends up in a French brothel, where she is raped and has a child. In spite of her difficult life circumstances, Marian maintains a positive attitude toward life, trying to be a good mother, and this is an inspiration for Aurora, who learns from Marian about the need for personal love in her life.

Lady Waldemar – Lady Waldemar is a beautiful and rich but conniving woman who wants to marry Romney. She feigns having an interest in the same social causes as him, but behind his back, she convinces Marian not to marry Romney. Aurora instinctively distrusts Lady Waldemar, and even at the end of the novel, they still have a hostile relationship. By rejecting Lady Waldemar as a potential wife, Romney rejects the superficial lifestyle of wealth and social status that she represents.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aurora's Father – Aurora's father is a well-read Englishman who was reserved until one day when he was in Italy and met Aurora's Florentine mother. He dies when Aurora is still a teenager, leaving behind his collection of books and his advice to "love, my child."

Aurora's Mother – Aurora's mother is a Florentine woman who died when Aurora was still very young. Although Aurora didn't know her mother for long, she still gets her passion and sense of Italian identity from her, which is why Aurora initially struggles to fit into the more sedate world of England.

Aurora's Aunt – Aurora's aunt is a cold, reserved Englishwoman who lives in **Leigh Hall** and rarely shows affection, except occasionally toward her favorite relative, Romney. She represents the opposite of Aurora's freer and more affection-filled life in Italy.

Lord Howe – Lord Howe is a friend of Romney's who has radical political views but who seems to live a conventional wealthy lifestyle. He becomes a means for Aurora to hear news of Romney during the time when she and Romney aren't communicating.

Vincent Carrington – Vincent Carrington is a painter who is a friend of Romney's. His painting work leads to him finding his wife, showing how personal love and art can intersect.

Sir Blaise – Sir Blaise is a man from the same social circle as Romney, Lady Waldemar, and Aurora. He is supposed to deliver an important message to Aurora in Italy but fails to find her.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MARRIAGE, EQUALITY, AND SOCIAL CLASS

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* examines the role that social class plays in marriage decisions, showing how class distinctions are both arbitrary but also hard to escape in society. The poem also explores how the issue of equality in marriage is much more complicated than simply the matter of social class, as in Romney's proposal to Aurora Leigh. Although the two of them come from the same family and are in the same social class in one sense, there is a clear power imbalance between the two of them. Romney is set to inherit the family fortune, while Aurora will be left comparatively poor unless she accepts Romney's proposal. Because of this, Aurora is at a disadvantage, and this gets reflected in Romney's condescending attitude during the proposal, where he talks down to Aurora about her artistic ambitions and seems to expect her to willingly become his servant. Aurora's refusal shows how, even when partners come from the same class, a marriage based on one partner serving the other is doomed to fail, perhaps before it even begins.

As the poem goes on, Romney gets the idea to marry Marian, whom he met through his social work and who is far below him in social class. Lady Waldemar, whose clear disdain for Marian shows the biases many people carried about the mixing of social classes, tries to weasel her way into Romney's life after his marriage with Marian falls through, largely because of Marian's belief that Romney needs a wife on the same "level" as himself. Although Lady Waldemar is at or above Romney's social class, she fails to be Romney's equal in other ways, having a very different set of values and not caring about social justice, a topic that is of central importance to Romney. While the novel depicts the many ways a marriage can fall apart due to differences, it ultimately offers hope by illustrating how Aurora and Romney finally manage to build a relationship as equals. Humbled by his past failures and the loss of his sight, Romney finally approaches Aurora on her own terms, respecting her talent and believing they can pursue meaningful work—and genuine love— together. *Aurora Leigh* portrays equality as the foundation of a successful marriage—but, radically, the poem upholds an equality based on mutual respect and shared values, not one based on social class.

FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S ROLES

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is sometimes considered part of the first wave of modern feminism due to the progressive and even radical ways that it explores women's issues. The narrator, Aurora, is constantly considering what it means to be a woman and how it's distinct from being a man, particularly when it comes to making art. As the poem shows, Aurora often has to deal with prejudice due to her status as a woman. People like Romney and some critics in the literary world, for example, don't take Aurora's poetry seriously because she's a woman, believing that women in general aren't capable of making art. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself obviously doesn't endorse this view, she portrays how it was not exclusively a male opinion, with even women like Lady Waldemar believing that women are limited in what they can accomplish and ill-suited to art. In spite of these prejudices and even her own self-doubts, Aurora publishes a successful **book**, demonstrating how some women were able to succeed in spite of these hurdles—and challenging Romney's perspectives on women, poetry, and life in so doing.

Even more so than Aurora, the character of Marian suffers from society's views about a woman's place. She begins life being mistreated by both her parents, in part because they see her as a weak and worthless girl. Her mother tries to sell her into sex work, which was one of the relatively few options available for a poor woman to make money. Marian eventually ends up at a French brothel where she is raped and has a child. Although Marian is a victim, people look down on her as "impure"—at least until she meets Aurora—illustrating the discrimination that poor women faced in particular. Aurora accepts Marian as she is, inviting Marian and her child to live with her in Italy, and the three of them form a successful family unit without the need for a man. Marian's life challenges patriarchal ideas about how women need men to survive and how a family is incomplete without a man. Through challenges ranging from Aurora's struggle to be taken seriously as an artist to Marian's fight for survival, the poem consistently champions women's inherent worth, dignity, and ability to determine the course of their own lives.

ART AND TRUTH

In *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning explores both how art can be a way of getting at the truth but also how it can fall short of this goal. Narrator and protagonist Aurora is obsessed with trying to write something beautiful and true in her poetry, essentially organizing her whole life around this pursuit after she moves to London to write in earnest. On the one hand, Aurora loves the writers of the past, including Greek poetry, Latin poetry, and Shakespeare, which she discovers through her father's old **book** collection. She is entranced by the beautifully pastoral scenes and epic characters that they depict, which seem more vibrant than the era she lives in. Still, in spite of Aurora's love for past literature, she comes to believe that it is still possible to write epic poetry about her current era and that to the epic poets of the past, the eras in which they lived probably also seemed commonplace. Aurora's journey to finding the truth in art begins with learning to appreciate what is true in the work of other artists and considering how she could achieve a similar effect in her own era.

For Aurora, this pursuit of truth is intimately tied to her

religious beliefs. She believes that all beauty in the world ultimately comes from God and that her attempts to express something true in her poetry are ultimately about praising God's work. This gives her humility in spite of her grand ambitions to write something epic and truthful—when one of her books finally begins to achieve popularity, Aurora's first reaction is surprise. For Aurora, the pursuit of the truth in art is more important than winning praise. While she can't help but think about how audiences react to her work, for her, poetry is ultimately a personal quest for her to better discover the truth of God's creation. Through Aurora's journey to becoming a poet in and for her own era, *Aurora Leigh* suggests that the best art arises not from the individual poet's ambitions, but from the poet's pursuit of divine truth and the desire to share that truth with humanity.

JUSTICE, ART, AND LOVE

Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora reckons with how to interpret and live out the final words of her father: "Love, my child." In spite of this advice, one of Aurora's first actions in the novel is to reject the marriage proposal of her cousin Romney, in part because she is more focused on her art (which Romney doesn't take seriously) and in part because Romney himself is too distracted with his social work to devote himself to personal love. Particularly when he's young, Romney earnestly and self-righteously believes he can change the world, and it's a rude awakening for him when his efforts fail. Romney's first major failure is when he attempts to marry the lower-class Marian, only for her to leave him at the altar and for poor wedding guests at the wedding to attack him, believing he has tricked Marian. In a way, the mob is right, and Romney has lied to Marian, pretending to love her personally when what he really cares about is his ideals. Romney faces an even bigger failure when he tries to turn the estate he inherited, **Leigh Hall**, into a place for the poor to sleep and eat. Locals soon rebel and burn down Leigh Hall, as a rumor spreads that Romney is actually managing a prison. Through Romney's disgrace, Barrett Browning trenchantly critiques the social justice efforts of her day as animated more by abstract ideals than by love.

Still, by the end of the novel, Aurora has changed her mind about Romney, having realized that as important as her artistic work is, she also needs to make room in her life for personal love. Aurora helps Romney to refine his ideals, showing him that sometimes it's best to prioritize love and that this can ultimately help his work for justice instead of distracting from it. This connects to Aurora's own efforts to balance her artistic ambitions with personal relationships, as Aurora invites Marian and her child into her life and forms the type of family connection she's been missing since the death of her parents. Through both characters' struggle to follow Aurora's father's dying advice, *Aurora Leigh* suggests that love, as expressed between individuals, is more important than either social reform or art and that, indeed, this type of personal love is the necessary basis for both pursuits.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BOOKS

Books represent a way for Aurora to relive the passionate feelings books stirred up in Aurora's childhood as well as Aurora's hopes and dreams for the future. Aurora first becomes obsessed with poetry when she reads old books that her father left behind. Although Aurora is initially drawn as a reader to books like Greek poetry, Latin poetry, and Shakespeare, she soon decides that she wants to become more than a reader and create her own poetry. She believes that her masterpiece will take the form of a book-length poem. Although to some people, like Aurora's aunt, books are just functional objects meant to convey information or give instructions for a proper woman's behavior, for Aurora, a book represents the potential to create something serious and important. Aurora sees the shorter pieces she publishes at the beginning of her career as simply a means to an end so that she can pay for her necessities and work on her book manuscript, which she believes will finally satisfy her artistic ambitions.

In spite of how much time and energy Aurora puts into crafting a book of poetry, when the book actually succeeds, it's a bit of an anticlimax. Aurora initially only sold the manuscript to finance a trip to Italy, and even then, it didn't make much money. When she later learns that her book is a success and that critics are talking about it, she is surprised and feels removed from the achievement, because she is away in Italy. Although the novel celebrates the artistic process and particularly the process of creating art as a woman, Aurora's mixed feelings about the success of her book suggest that it isn't possible for artistic ambition to fulfill the role that personal love plays in a person's life. While Aurora's book's success plays a role in her happy ending, she also learns to form a close relationship with Marian and accept the romantic love of Romney. Books in *Aurora Leigh* represent passion and an antidote to restrained English life, but as Aurora learns by the end of the poem, books are not enough to fulfill the same role as loving, enduring personal relationships.

LEIGH HALL

Leigh Hall, the longtime home of the Leigh family in England that Aurora goes to live in after the death of her father and mother, symbolizes the emptiness of wealthy

English life. Initially, Leigh Hall is the residence of Aurora's aunt, who takes her in after she's orphaned in Italy. Although the hall is large and impressive, Aurora still longs to be back in the mountains of Italy. The contrast of Aurora's beautiful home in Italy with her depressing new one in England reflects how the relationship she had with her father was full of affection, while her relationship with her aunt is much colder. Leigh Hall represents the rigid, traditional culture of England, and one of these traditions turns out to be patriarchy—Aurora has no claim to her family home, which will go to the male heir, Romney, after her aunt's death.

After Aurora leaves Leigh Hall for good, Romney has his own ideas about how to change Leigh Hall's legacy: he wants to turn it into a shelter for the poor. While this idea might seem generous, Romney is arrogantly convinced that he's capable of changing the whole world, and this leads him to set his scope too wide rather than dealing with people on a personal level. In the end, Romney's plan to transform Leigh Hall fails spectacularly, as neighbors who dislike the commotion break windows, and ultimately, the place burns down to ashes. Romney's failure to transform Leigh Hall reflects his own personal shortcomings but also illustrates how difficult it is to change the ingrained traditions of upper-class life in England. Leigh Hall represents the coldness and emptiness of upper-class life in England, and Romney's failure to transform the hall into a welcoming place for the poor reflects both how misguided he is and how difficult it is to change traditional values.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Aurora Leigh* published in 2008.

Book 1 Quotes

Of writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For others' uses, will write now for mine,—
Will write my story for my better self,
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the beginning of the novel and introduces the narrator and main character, Aurora Leigh. The whole novel is written in Aurora's voice in blank verse poetry, which is fitting because, as Aurora establishes in this introduction, she herself is a poet. Up until this point, most of Aurora's writing has focused on others, perhaps reflecting a belief that her own experiences aren't significant enough to be interesting to her audience. By finally choosing to write about herself, Aurora affirms that her experiences are valuable, and she has developed enough introspection to tell about them.

Although Aurora's decision to write about herself could be triumphant and a sign of confidence, she undercuts this almost immediately by comparing her work to a portrait that someone "keeps in a drawer." In this metaphor, the portrait that Aurora describes is a reminder of a past love that can't be brought back. This image resonates with Aurora's own life. She is a highly nostalgic person and often holds on to important memories from the past, like her childhood in Italy, even though she knows it isn't possible to go back. Ultimately, this passage establishes that Aurora has grown up and is reflecting back on an earlier, less mature but very formative period of her life, hinting at how the poem will chart her growth as a character. It's also worth noting that the opening line—"Of writing many books there is no end"—is an allusion to the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible, where King Solomon comments on the limitations of earthly wisdom. The allusion establishes Aurora's connection to Christianity and suggests that she will face the limits of her own understanding over the course of the poem.

Love, my child, love, love!

Related Characters: Aurora's Father (speaker), Aurora Leigh, Aurora's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is Aurora's father's final words to Aurora on the day he dies. By this point, Aurora's mother has already died, and so as just a teenager, Aurora becomes an orphan. Aurora's father was a reserved Englishman for much of his life, but when he came to Italy, he opened up a new side of

himself and fell in love with Aurora's mother. Although their marriage didn't last long due to his wife's early death, Aurora's father's final exhortation to "love" suggests that he doesn't regret his decisions—and that he wants Aurora to do the same.

While Aurora's father's final instructions may seem simple and direct, Aurora will spend much of her life trying to figure out how to live them. There is a difference, for example, between personal, romantic love and the broader type of love that comes from loving humanity as a whole. Furthermore, Aurora also learns to love books and poetry, at times placing her goals as a writer above her personal relationships. It takes Aurora until the end of the novel to realize that, while all of these kinds of love are important, ultimately, it is close personal love like the kind between Aurora's parents that she needs in her life.

She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird.
Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live
In thickets, and eat berries!
I, alas,
A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage,
And she was there to meet me. Very kind.
Bring the clean water; give out the fresh seed.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Aurora's Father, Aurora's Mother, Aurora's Aunt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is how Aurora (as the narrator) describes her aunt, who lives in the lavish but isolated Leigh Hall in the English countryside. Aurora considers her aunt to be someone who leads "a sort of cage-bird life," meaning that she's someone who is reserved and buttoned-up. More than that, Aurora's aunt has limited horizons and can't even imagine a life beyond isolated Leigh Hall. Continuing the bird metaphor, Aurora's aunt thinks that other "birds" who live in the wild, in thickets and eating berries, are "silly." Aurora thinks of herself as a wild bird, like her parents, who just barely "fledged" her before her father's death.

Although Aurora is unhappy with this new living arrangement, she doesn't resist it. She accepts the "clean water" and "fresh seed" (food and other basic necessities) that her aunt provides, wanting to please her aunt even as she dislikes her way of living. Aurora's aunt represents how in general, English society can be repressed, with people reluctant to acknowledge or express their feelings, and although Aurora was born in a freer environment, she spends much of the novel looking for a way to get back this freedom and passion her parents had nurtured in her.

Book 2 Quotes

'Better far,
Pursue a frivolous trade by serious means,
Than a sublime art frivolously.'

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh, Aurora's Aunt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Aurora is having an argument with Romney about the role of women in society and whether or not it's possible for them to be artists. Romney believes that women are incapable of making art, and he becomes increasingly vocal about this as Aurora's arguments begin to frustrate him. As this quote shows, Aurora takes her artistic work very seriously. She believes that to create a masterpiece ("sublime art"), an artist can't work "frivolously," and that if they can't do that, then they should just settle for a "frivolous trade" instead.

On the one hand, Aurora's strong beliefs show how, unlike her aunt, she is developing passions in her life. Aurora's pride in and dedication to her artistic work is also part of her way of proving to Romney that women can be great artists. Still, this passage also captures Aurora at an early point in her writing career. Later, Aurora will see herself as naïve and as perhaps putting too much emphasis on her art at the expense of her personal relationships. By the end of the novel, Aurora still tries to pursue sublime art seriously, but she's learned that cultivating personal love and relationships is an important part of life and not a distraction from art.

‘You misconceive the question like a man,
Who sees a woman as the complement
Of his sex merely. You forget too much
That every creature, female as the male,
Stands single in responsible act and thought,
As also in birth and death. Whoever says
To a loyal woman, ‘Love and work with me,’
Will get fair answers, if the work and love,
Being good themselves, are good for her—the best
She was born for.’

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the end of a conversation that Aurora and Romney have one fateful June morning when Aurora is 20 years old. Romney has just proposed marriage to Aurora somewhat suddenly, and in this passage, Aurora explains why she is rejecting Romney. Aurora’s main complaint is that Romney just sees women as a “complement” to men, meaning that they exist only to help men. Aurora rejects this idea strongly, arguing that instead, every person “stands single in responsible act and thought,” which means that men and women each have autonomy.

Aurora will often think back on this moment, sometimes concluding that she was right to reject Romney, other times wishing that she had done the opposite and accepted Romney’s love. Aurora’s changing feelings show how she grows as a character as well as how complicated love can be for anyone. Ultimately, as Romney himself later admits, Aurora is correct to label his views as sexist, and Aurora’s rejection of him is the beginning of her path toward the feminist idea that women deserve to be equal to men.

‘I go hence
To London, to the gathering-place of souls,
To live mine straight out, vocally, in books;
Harmoniously for others, if indeed
A woman’s soul, like man’s, be wide enough
To carry the whole octave (that’s to prove)
Or, if I fail, still, purely for myself.
Pray God be with me, Romney.’

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is one of the last things that Aurora says to Romney for a long while, right after she rejects his marriage proposal. After Romney questions the ability of any woman to succeed as a poet, Aurora decides that she wants to personally prove him wrong, going to London to try to make it as a writer herself.

London, “the gathering-place of souls,” represents a new phase of Aurora’s life, with an urban setting being very different from both pastoral Italy and isolated Leigh Hall. She wants to prove that a woman’s soul is “wide enough” to contain what’s needed to create great poetry and isn’t certain yet that she is up to the task. Nevertheless, what’s even more important than success for Aurora is simply the chance to succeed or fail “purely for myself.” In addition to using the language of music like “harmoniously” and “octave,” Aurora also makes several religious references, to “souls” and “God.” This shows how important this move to London is for Aurora and how her beliefs about the equality of women and artistic ambition are related to her broader religious beliefs about all souls being equal before God.

Book 3 Quotes

When Romney Leigh and I had parted thus,
I took a chamber up three flights of stairs
Not far from being as steep as some larks climb,
And, in a certain house in Kensington,

Three years I lived and worked. Get leave to work
In this world,—’tis the best you get at all;
For God, in cursing, gives us better gifts
Than men in benediction. God says, ‘Sweat
For foreheads;’ men say ‘crowns;’ and so we are crowned

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh, Aurora’s Aunt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes what happens to Aurora in the years

after she rejects both Romney's marriage proposal and his offer to give her some money (since she didn't inherit much from her aunt). During this period of time, Aurora goes to London to try to make it on her own as a writer. Her living situation, which she describes as just a "chamber" on the third floor of a building, is modest, particularly compared to the mountains of Italy or even the spacious Leigh Hall, but Aurora is positive about her situation.

For Aurora, the most important thing at this point in her life is to have "leave to work" on her poetry. Although she frequently has to do other work, including writing that she considers less worthwhile, she feels that work is good for her. She believes that a curse from God is better than "benediction" from men, and so she accepts the difficulty of her work, seeing it as a chance to prove herself. Although Aurora's dedication to her work shows how serious she is as an artist, her views on the matter will change later, as she realizes that her narrow focus on her work caused her to neglect her personal relationships.

> 'We catch love
> And other fevers, in the vulgar way.
> Love will not be outwitted by our wit,
> Nor outrun by our equipages:—mine
> Persisted, spite of efforts. All my cards
> Turned up but Romney Leigh;'

Related Characters: Lady Waldemar (speaker), Aurora Leigh, Romney Leigh, Aurora's Aunt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

One day while Aurora is living in her chamber in London, she gets a surprise visit from Lady Waldemar, who in this quote explains to Aurora how she has supposedly fallen in love with Romney. Aurora notes that Lady Waldemar has a very aristocratic voice, and her way of speaking backs this up. Lady Waldemar speaks of love, for example, as a "vulgar" thing that happens to people, showing how she sees herself as a member of the upper class and doesn't like to be at the mercy of feelings like love, which she sees as beneath her.

Lady Waldemar claims that she is in love with Romney and can't stop thinking about him. But her love isn't joyous or passionate—instead it seems to be more of a compulsion. Lady Waldemar's version of love is also about possession and needing to have something. Similar to Romney's own proposal to Aurora, this kind of affection is not based on equality and instead comes from a place of condescension. Although Lady Waldemar is not as prudish as Aurora's aunt, she shows another way that even a supposedly passionate romance can be hollow if it doesn't come from knowing the other person as an equal.

> 'So young,' he gently asked her, 'you have lost
> Your father and your mother?'
> 'Both,' she said,
> 'Both lost! my father was burnt up with gin
> Or ever I sucked milk, and so is lost.
> My mother sold me to a man last month,
> And so my mother's lost, 'tis manifest.
> And I, who fled from her for miles and miles,
> As if I had caught sight of the fires of hell
> Through some wild gap, (she was my mother, sir)
> It seems I shall be lost too, presently,
> And so we end, all three of us.'
> 'Poor child!'
> He said,—with such a pity in his voice.

Related Characters: Romney Leigh, Marian Erle (speaker), Aurora Leigh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

When Aurora goes to find Marian, the lower-class woman that Romney is about to marry, Marian tells Aurora her life story, including this quote about how Marian and Romney first met. It was in a hospital, where Marian ended up after her own mother severely beat her. As Marian describes, her father was "burnt up with gin" (alcoholic), while the whole reason that Marian's mother beat her is because Marian refused when her mother tried to sell her to a man for sex.

Initially, Marian is moved by how well Romney treats her, particularly since few other people in her life treat her well. But as this passage shows, Romney's relationship with Marian begins not from love but from "pity." For Romney, his charity work is even more important to him than love, and marrying Marian provides the opportunity for him to do a good deed—or at least what he thinks will be a good deed. Marian's origin both makes her similar to Aurora (who also lost her parents, albeit in different circumstances) and also highlights how fortunate Aurora is by comparison, showing how despite Aurora's modest life in London, there is still a

clear class difference between her and people like Marian.

Book 4 Quotes

'So indeed
He loves you, Marian?'
'Loves me!' She looked up
With a child's wonder when you ask him first
Who made the sun—a puzzled blush, that grew,
Then broke off in a rapid radiant smile
Of sure solution. 'Loves me! he loves all,—
And me, of course. He had not asked me else
To work with him for ever, and be his wife.'

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh, Marian Erle (speaker), Romney Leigh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, after Marian has finished telling her life story to Aurora, Aurora asks Marian if Romney, the man she's about to marry, truly loves her. Aurora asks the question in a direct, straightforward way, and yet Marian seems surprised, struck with "a child's wonder" when she has to consider the answer to the question. This hesitance to give an immediate answer suggests that perhaps Romney doesn't love Marian and perhaps she even knows it—even if she's found ways to justify his behavior to herself.

Marian's ultimate answer is that Romney "loves all" and so of course that includes Marian. This is certainly an answer that would please Romney, who thinks of himself in grandiose, often delusional terms as a person who wants to help all of humanity. But the problem with this way of thinking is that it stops him from forming a deeper relationship with Marian, seeing her as just one person of many. This passage lays out why the planned marriage between Marian and Romney is doomed to fail, showing how a relationship based on pity can't achieve the type of equality that a successful relationship needs to survive.

Let me draw Lord Howe;
A born aristocrat, bred radical,
And educated socialist, who still
Goes floating, on traditions of his kind,
Across the theoretic flood from France,—
Though, like a drenched Noah on a rotten deck,
Scarce safer for his place there. He, at least,
Will never land on Ararat, he knows,
To recommence the world on the old plan:
Indeed, he thinks, said world had better end;
He sympathises rather with the fish
Outside, than with the drowned paired beasts within
Who cannot couple again or multiply:
And that's the sort of Noah he is, Lord Howe.
He never could be anything complete,
Except a loyal, upright gentleman,
A liberal landlord, graceful diner-out,
And entertainer more than hospitable,
Whom authors dine with and forget the port.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh, Lady Waldemar, Lord Howe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote Aurora gives her thoughts about Lord Howe, an outgoing man who is part of the same social circle as Lady Waldemar and Romney. Aurora finds Lord Howe more agreeable than someone like Lady Waldemar, and yet her description of him in this passage is satirical. From the very beginning, Aurora notes that Lord Howe is "born aristocrat, bred radical, and educated socialist," suggesting a confusing and perhaps inconsistent set of qualities.

Although Lord Howe supposedly has progressive ideas about social welfare, his actions and lifestyle don't reflect this. The extended metaphor in the middle of this quote about Noah's Ark and the Great Flood (which ends with the Ark landing on Mount Ararat) suggests that Lord Howe is someone who goes with the flow and doesn't really sympathize much with the poor. Aurora says that the best he can be is a "liberal landlord" or a "graceful diner-out," suggesting that perhaps he treats people of lower classes politely, but only when his own higher position is secure. Aurora's comments on Lord Howe show how she is getting a better understanding of English society and beginning to see the role that class and money play in shaping people's lives and behavior.

Through the rage and roar
I heard the broken words which Romney flung
Among the turbulent masses, from the ground
He held still, with his masterful pale face—
As huntsmen throw the ration to the pack,
Who, falling on it headlong, dog on dog
In heaps of fury, rend it, swallow it up

With yelling hound-jaws,—his indignant words,
His piteous words, his most pathetic words,
Whereof I caught the meaning here and there
By his gesture ... torn in morsels, yelled across,
And so devoured.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh, Marian Erle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Aurora describes the scene that ensues after Romney announces from the altar of his own wedding that Marian has just written him a letter about why she can't go through with the marriage. This announcement causes a surprisingly strong reaction from the crowd gathered at the wedding (many of whom are sick or lower class), as the people in the crowd come to the conclusion that Romney has tricked Marian. This leads to a riot, with the crowd attacking Romney and Aurora eventually fainting in shock.

This passage is one of the first moments in the novel when Romney has to face the limits of what he can do and the failures of his charity attempts. Aurora compares the scene to a pack of hunting dogs all fighting for a "ration" thrown by their huntsmen. The darkness of this scene contrasts with Romney's own ideas about lower-class people and his belief that he is the only one who can help them. Although Romney has not done the thing this crowd accuses him of, he has nevertheless failed to take the time to understand these people on a personal level, and this in turn makes the wedding guests distrust Romney.

Book 5 Quotes

Shall I fail?
The Greeks said grandly in their tragic phrase,
'Let no one be called happy till his death.'
To which I add,—Let no one till his death
Be called unhappy. Measure not the work

Until the day's out and the labour done;
Then bring your gauges. If the day's work's scant,
Why, call it scant; affect no compromise;
And, in that we have nobly striven at least,
Deal with us nobly, women though we be,
And honour us with truth, if not with praise.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Much of Book 5 is devoted to Aurora taking stock of her progress so far as a writer and laying out her artistic philosophy, with this quote revolving around Aurora's ideas on success. Aurora admits that in some ways she has failed—she has not published a long, serious poem that has found an audience yet. Still, in this quote, Aurora takes a different view of things, questioning the concept of what failure even means.

When Aurora says "measure not the work/Until the day's out and the labour done," she means that you can't judge a person's life until the very end. Aurora may not have achieved success as a poet yet, but she doesn't know what the future holds for her and what she may have learned from her previous efforts. For Aurora, it is particularly important not to lose hope because she wants to prove that as a woman, she is capable of confronting disappointments "nobly" and continuing on with her work. As this quote makes clear, success for Aurora isn't just for herself but also a way of proving how women in general are capable of making great art.

> Ay, but every age
> Appears to souls who live in it, (ask Carlyle)
> Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours!
> The thinkers scout it, and the poets abound
> Who scorn to touch it with a finger-tip:
> A pewter age,—mixed metal, silver-washed;
> An age of scum, spooned off the richer past;
> An age of patches for old gaberdines;
> An age of mere transition, meaning nought,
>
> Except that what succeeds must shame it quite,
> If God please. That's wrong thinking, to my mind,
> And wrong thoughts make poor poems.
>
> Every age,
> Through being beheld too close, is ill-discerned
> By those who have not lived past it.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Aurora's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Aurora continues to outline her literary philosophy, suggesting that while it might seem at first like the age she lives in isn't remarkable, people in other ages probably thought the same thing. While literary critics point to various points in the past as "Golden Ages" of poetry, Aurora writes that her current age feels like a "pewter age," with pewter being a functional material that is significantly less valuable than gold. According to Aurora, it's easy to fall into the trap that there was some "richer past" that the present is only a pale echo of.

Aurora's reason for rejecting these ideas is that she believes it takes the distance created by the passage of time to truly measure an age's worth. If a time period is "beheld too close" (such as by someone living through it), then it is "ill-discerned." By extension then, a poet writing in Aurora's age could write something just as epic and lasting as the ancient Greek and Roman poets that Aurora loved to read in her father's books. And so, this quote celebrates the lasting power of poetry while once again promoting the feminist message that the poetry of a woman like Aurora could one day be measured alongside the greats of the past.

> At worst,—if he's incapable of love,
> Which may be—then indeed, for such a man
> Incapable of love, she's good enough;
> For she, at worst too, is a woman still
> And loves him ... as the sort of woman can.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh, Marian Erle, Lady Waldemar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, after reflecting on her own poetry, Aurora turns to the topic of Romney and the rumors that, after his planned marriage with Marian fell through, he now plans to marry Lady Waldemar. Although Lady Waldemar claimed to love Romney when she came to see Aurora, Aurora can sense that she is manipulative and suspects that she may have had something to do with Marian's sudden disappearance. And so, Aurora debates whether or not she has a moral responsibility to interfere with Romney's potential marriage to Lady Waldemar.

Ultimately, Aurora chooses not to intervene. She reasons that if Romney is "incapable" of love, then he may as well marry someone like Lady Waldemar, who loves Romney to the extent that she's capable for "the sort of woman" she is. Although Aurora phrases things as if she's reasoning logically, there is perhaps some bitterness to her decision to leave Romney to his fate. What Aurora really seems to want is a version of Romney who is capable of love—and who would share that love with Aurora herself. Aurora's decision to let Romney marry Lady Waldemar is an admission of defeat, as Aurora resigns herself to the fact that whatever feelings she has for Romney, he won't ever be ready to love her properly.

Book 6 Quotes

‘And so, that little stone, called Marian Erle,
Picked up and dropped by you and another friend,
Was ground and tortured by the incessant sea
And bruised from what she was,—changed! death’s a change,
And she, I said, was murdered; Marian’s dead.
What can you do with people when they are dead,
But, if you are pious, sing a hymn and go,
Or, if you are tender, heave a sigh and go,
But go by all means,—and permit the grass
To keep its green feud up ’twixt them and you?
Then leave me,—let me rest. I’m dead, I say.
And if, to save the child from death as well,
The mother in me has survived the rest,
Why, that’s God’s miracle you must not tax,—

I’m not less dead for that: I’m nothing more
But just a mother.’

Related Characters: Marian Erle (speaker), Aurora Leigh, Romney Leigh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

After Marian disappears on the day of her planned wedding to Romney, Aurora doesn’t see her for a while until one day when they happen to meet by chance in Paris, and Marian explains what has happened in her life since then. In this quote, Marian alludes to the rape (which she metaphorically calls a “murder”) that led to the birth of her child. Marian’s frequent references to death, including her proclamation that “Marian’s dead,” shows how traumatic and painful this event was for her.

Still, while in this quote Marian describes her suffering, she ultimately shows resilience and that in spite of her “death,” she still has to live for the sake of her child. Marian’s words suggest that motherhood itself is a different kind of “death,” now that protecting her child has become more important to her than even her own life. While Marian’s story could evoke pity—as was often the case when Romney looked at her—Aurora is better able to see Marian as a complete person and realize how in spite of the many things Marian has suffered, she is resilient and not someone who needs pity.

‘I never blame the lady. Ladies who
Sit high, however willing to look down,
Will scarce see lower than their dainty feet.’

Related Characters: Marian Erle (speaker), Aurora Leigh, Lady Waldemar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, after telling Aurora about all the terrible things that have happened to her since she left England, Marian ends by saying that she doesn’t blame her misfortunes on Lady Waldemar. In fact, it was Lady Waldemar’s maid who abandoned Marian at the brothel where she was raped, and so Marian would have good reason to blame Lady Waldemar. Marian’s refusal to blame her shows how Marian is capable of forgiveness, although her forgiveness also comes with a jab at Lady Waldemar.

The reason why Marian doesn’t blame Lady Waldemar is because the lady “sits high” and can’t see any lower than her “dainty feet.” In this metaphor, Marian is below even Lady Waldemar’s feet, reflecting how sharp class differences are in English society. Marian believes that Lady Waldemar’s high status limits her ability to see and understand lower-class issues. Ultimately, Marian challenges the idea that she is powerless and that Lady Waldemar is powerful, showing how the high status of people like Lady Waldemar isolates them from the world, leaving them clueless.

Book 7 Quotes

I thought, ‘Now, if I had been a woman, such
As God made women, to save men by love,—
By just my love I might have saved this man,

And made a nobler poem for the world
Than all I have failed in.’ But I failed besides
In this; and now he’s lost! through me alone!
And, by my only fault, his empty house
Sucks in, at this same hour, a wind from hell
To keep his hearth cold, make his casements creak
For ever to the tune of plague and sin—
O Romney, O my Romney, O my friend!
My cousin and friend! my helper, when I would,
My love, that might be! mine!

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh, Marian Erle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Aurora has finally gone back to her home country of Italy in search of poetic inspiration, taking Marian and her child along with her, but even as she's surrounded by the beautiful city of Florence, she can't help thinking of her life back in England—and in particular of Romney. Aurora was adamant in her initial rejection of Romney's marriage proposal, and in her reflections on that time, she has usually agreed that she made the right choice—until now, when she wonders nostalgically whether things would have turned out better if she had accepted Romney's proposal.

By saying that a marriage to Romney might have been a "nobler poem" than her other failures, Aurora judges her own poetic work so far harshly. She focuses less on her own happiness than on Romney's, blaming herself for his "empty house" and cold hearth, which she could have helped with. Although this quote is a significant moment for Aurora as she begins to learn the value of personal relationships, she is still in the middle of growing as a character and will eventually discover that prioritizing personal relationships doesn't have to mean giving up her poetic work, which can still be a way to search for the truth.

> 'Meantime your book
> Is eloquent as if you were not dumb;
> And common critics, ordinarily deaf
> To such fine meanings, and, like deaf men, loth
>
> To seem deaf, answering chance-wise, yes or no,
> 'It must be,' or 'it must not,' (most pronounced
> When least convinced) pronounce for once aright:
> You'd think they really heard,—and so they do ...
> The burr of three or four who really hear
> And praise your book aright: Fame's smallest trump
> Is a great ear-trumpet for the deaf as posts,
> No other being effective. Fear not, friend;
> We think, here, you have written a good book,
> And you, a woman! It was in you—yes.'

Related Characters: Vincent Carrington (speaker), Aurora Leigh, Romney Leigh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is an excerpt of a letter from Vincent Carrington, a painter and a friend of both Aurora and Romney, whom Aurora put in charge of selling a manuscript of one of her long poems. When Vincent calls Aurora "dumb" (as in speechless), he is referencing how she didn't answer one of his previous letters. Yet in spite of Aurora not writing to Vincent, her latest book has been saying a lot back in London, with critics praising it and vigorously debating its meaning.

Vincent satirizes literary criticism of the day, suggesting that many critics are "like deaf men, loth to seem deaf," meaning deaf men who are trying to hide their deafness. This suggests that critics are reading Aurora's book because it's become popular and that they are not always understanding it. Still, Vincent makes clear at the end that he himself believes it is a worthwhile book. The final line of this excerpt—"And you, a woman! It was in you—yes."—suggests that perhaps like Romney, Vincent had doubts about the artistic capabilities of women but that Aurora's book has proven to him what women can do. Ultimately, Vincent's letter vindicates Aurora and her goals as a poet, showing how she has achieved her goals of writing a book that captures her era and of proving that women can be great artists.

> I rode once to the little mountain-house
> As fast as if to find my father there,
> But, when in sight of't, within fifty yards,
> I dropped my horse's bridle on his neck
> And paused upon his flank. The house's front
> Was cased with lingots of ripe Indian corn
> In tesselated order, and device
> Of golden patterns: not a stone of wall
>
> Uncovered,—not an inch of room to grow
> A vine-leaf. The old porch had disappeared;
> And, in the open doorway, sate a girl
> At plaiting straws,—her black hair strained away
> To a scarlet kerchief caught beneath her chin
> In Tuscan fashion,—her full ebon eyes,
> Which looked too heavy to be lifted so,
> Still dropt and lifted toward the mulberry-tree
> [...]
> Enough. My horse recoiled before my heart—
> I turned the rein abruptly. Back we went
> As fast, to Florence.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Aurora's

Father, Aurora's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Aurora rides out of Florence into the Italian countryside to find the house in the mountains where she lived with her father for many years after the death of her mother. Aurora reacts with shock, dropping her horse's bridle, and at first, it seems like she is struck by the beauty of the place, lingering on details like the "lingots of ripe Indian corn/In tessellated order" on the wall. As the passage goes on, however, it becomes clear that what Aurora is really noticing is how different the house is from her memory, and this causes such a strong reaction in her that she is forced to leave abruptly.

In both Leigh Hall and London, Aurora often thought back on Italy as a passionate, happy place that was more alive than England. But when Aurora finally goes back, she realizes that the Italy she remembers is no longer there—and that perhaps what she really wants is for life to be like it was with her parents, which isn't possible. Aurora's trip back to Italy helps her reconnect with her past, but it also teaches her how she can't go back in time.

Book 8 Quotes

'That is consequent:
The poet looks beyond the book he has made,
Or else he had not made it. If a man
Could make a man, he'd henceforth be a god
In feeling what a little thing is man:
It is not my case. And this special book,
I did not make it, to make light of it:
It stands above my knowledge, draws me up;
'Tis high to me.'

Related Characters: Romney Leigh (speaker), Aurora Leigh, Marian Erle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

Romney has just surprised Aurora and Marian by coming down to Florence to visit them at their villa, and one of the first things that Romney tells Marian is that he's read her book of poetry, which has become popular in London. Although Romney spoke dismissively about Aurora's poetic talents many years ago, as well as about the poetic capabilities of women in general, here he praises Aurora's book effusively.

Romney explains that in his concept of poetry, a poet "looks beyond the book he has made,/Or else he had not made it." This means that a good poem is not just a book, but something that engages with the wider world. For much of the novel, Romney has had a condescending, self-righteous attitude, even during moments when he's seemingly trying to be charitable. That's why it's surprising in this passage that he says Aurora's book "stands above my knowledge." By calling Aurora's book "high" compared to him, Romney acknowledges both his own shortcomings in his arrogant past behavior and also his recognition that Aurora has important and true things to say, both as a poet and as a person.

'For this time I must speak out and confess
That I, so truculent in assumption once,
So absolute in dogma, proud in aim,
And fierce in expectation,—I, who felt
The whole world tugging at my skirts for help,
As if no other man than I, could pull,
Nor woman, but I led her by the hand,
Nor cloth hold, but I had it in my coat,—
Do know myself to-night for what I was
On that June-day, Aurora. Poor bright day,
Which meant the best ... a woman and a rose, ...
And which I smote upon the cheek with words,
Until it turned and rent me! Young you were,
That birthday, poet, but you talked the right:

While I, ... I built up follies like a wall
To intercept the sunshine and your face.
Your face! that's worse.'

Related Characters: Romney Leigh (speaker), Aurora Leigh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

At the villa in Italy, Romney continues to apologize to

Aurora for his past behavior, and in this quote, he looks honestly at how his charity work in the past was flawed. Although Romney supposedly wanted to help other people, he finally admits that he was "truculent in assumption," meaning too violently excitable about how he approached his work. By being so "proud" and dogmatic, Romney couldn't stop himself from looking down on the people he helped, seeing them in infantilizing ways, such as "tugging" at his "skirts" for help, like little children would do.

Interestingly, not long after Aurora said that she regretted rejecting Romney on that June morning, Romney says the opposite and praises Aurora for having the sense to reject him. He recognizes that his charity work was partly about having the power to lead others around, and he also realizes how his proposal to Aurora was part of this same pattern of behavior. Romney's apology to Aurora shows how he has changed as a person in the time since he's seen her, and it also helps to counteract some of the recent self-doubts Aurora has had, as Romney's words of praise show how as much as Aurora has grown up, she also got some things right in the past.

Book 9 Quotes

❝ 'Oh, it does me good,
It wipes me clean and sweet from devil's dirt,
That Romney Leigh should think me worthy still
Of being his true and honourable wife!
Henceforth I need not say, on leaving earth,
I had no glory in it. For the rest,
The reason's ready (master, angel, friend,
Be patient with me) wherefore you and I
Can never, never, never join hands so.
I know you'll not be angry like a man
(*For you* are none) when I shall tell the truth,—
Which is, I do not love you, Romney Leigh,
I do not love you. Ah well! catch my hands,
Miss Leigh, and burn into my eyes with yours,—
I swear I do not love him. Did I once?'

Related Characters: Marian Erle (speaker), Aurora Leigh, Romney Leigh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

Romney learns that Marian, having disappeared after her planned wedding to Romney, is alive and well, living unmarried with her new child, and this causes him to renew his marriage proposal to her. In this quote in response, Marian begins by offering gratitude for Romney's offer before eventually getting into the reasons why she can't accept his proposal. Marian admits that there is "glory" in the idea that someone as noble as Romney could love someone as low status as her, but Marian ultimately believes that the love between the two of them isn't true and that true love is necessary for marriage.

The words that Marian uses to describe Romney ("master, angel, friend") show how she still doesn't see him as equal to her. But while Marian talks about herself as lower than Romney, she is also wiser than him in some ways, having a better sense of why a relationship between the two of them wouldn't work. In this speech, which ends up being more or less the end of Marian's story, she shows her appreciation to Romney for his help but ultimately asserts her own independence, knowing that she will have to fend for herself and her son going forward.

❝ 'Ah, my friend,
You'll learn to say it in a cheerful voice.
I, too, at first desponded. To be blind,
Turned out of nature, mulcted as a man,
Refused the daily largesse of the sun
To humble creatures! When the fever's heat
Dropped from me, as the flame did from my house,
And left me ruined like it, stripped of all
The hues and shapes of aspectable life,
A mere bare blind stone in the blaze of day,
A man, upon the outside of the earth,
As dark as ten feet under, in the grave,—
Why that seemed hard.'

Related Characters: Romney Leigh (speaker), Aurora Leigh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Romney describes the terrible fever that he suffered for several days, not too long after a fire burned down Leigh Hall, ending Romney's hopes of turning it into a successful shelter for the poor. The fever seems to have been Romney's rock bottom before he came back to see

Aurora in Italy, with the fever forcing him to confront his mortality and the idea that he can't fix the world by himself.

Perhaps most severe of all, Romney ends up blinded by the fever. This blindness is another reminder of Romney's mortality, leaving his world "as dark as ten feet under, in the grave." It's also a physical sign of how Romney used to fail to "see" things in a metaphorical sense, due to his own arrogance and self-righteousness. Still, while Romney's blindness is a reminder of a low moment for him, it also comes at the moment when he begins to see his relationship with Aurora with greater clarity. This ties into Aurora's belief that the soul is more important than the physical body, with Romney's physical sight ultimately being a small price to pay for the greater sense of perspective that he gets about his life.

My Romney!—Lifting up my hand in his,
As wheeled by Seeing spirits toward the east,
He turned instinctively,—where, faint and fair,
Along the tingling desert of the sky,
Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
The first foundations of that new, near Day
Which should be builded out of heaven, to God.

He stood a moment with erected brows,
In silence, as a creature might, who gazed:
Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes
Upon the thought of perfect noon. And when
I saw his soul saw,—'Jasper first,' I said,
'And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
The rest in order, ... last, an amethyst.

Related Characters: Aurora Leigh (speaker), Romney Leigh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 325

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the ending of the novel. After Romney confesses to Aurora that he's blind and the two of them confess their love to each other, Aurora embraces Romney and begins describing for him the landscape around him that he can no longer see. As Aurora notes, in spite of being unable to see, Romney sometimes still turns his head "instinctively" toward the direction where a new day is dawning. This again suggests how in spite of losing his physical sight, Romney has gotten better at seeing the truth.

Dawn is significant both because it signifies new beginnings and because Aurora, in classical mythology, was the Roman goddess of the dawn. By describing the landscape that Romney can't see, Aurora helps Romney without becoming subservient to him. Importantly, she also doesn't pity Romney, instead describing him in noble terms, particularly his "blind, majestic eyes." Ultimately, the ending of the poem reaffirms the final advice of Aurora's father—"love, my child"—with Aurora being rewarded for opening herself up to love. The fact that this reunion was only made possible by the book Aurora published makes clear that the personal love in Aurora's life doesn't have to conflict with her ambitions as a poet.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1

The narrator, Aurora Leigh, has done a lot of writing about other people but decides that now it's time to tell her own story. She is still young, although both her parents are gone. She tells the story of her past, starting at the beginning. Her mother, who is from Florence, dies when Aurora is only four—her mother was always sickly and frail but had beautiful blue eyes. Aurora grows up longing for the presence of a mother in her life, which her father struggles to fill.

The beginning of the poem introduces Aurora, the main character and narrator of the story. Although Aurora describes herself as still young, the opening book of the poem involves her looking back on her past self from the present, where she is a published writer with a more mature perspective. This gives the beginning a nostalgic tone. Much of the novel revolves around Aurora learning what it means to be a woman, and the early death of her mother leaves her without a woman in her life to teach her, meaning Aurora must learn many things on her own—often through books.

Aurora's father is an Englishman who is normally reserved but who felt a sudden burst of passion during a trip to Florence when he met Aurora's mother. When he suddenly becomes a widower, he feels adrift and leaves Florence to take Aurora into the mountains by Pelago. He learns to bond with Aurora through **books**, which help her learn about the world. People tell Aurora she's like her father, with similarly pale and delicate features. Aurora and her father stay in the mountains for nine years after her mother's death.

Aurora's mother and father represent the two different sides of her, with her father being more reserved and analytical while her mother is more open and passionate. As a poet, Aurora tries to embody the qualities of both her parents, combining control and spontaneity. In a novel where marriages and courtship often go wrong, Aurora's family represents a positive example of how two people from different parts of the world can come together and form a union based on personal love that combines each of their best qualities.

One day when she's 13, Aurora's father suddenly dies. His last words to her are "Love, my child." Although Aurora is still growing, this is an end to her childhood. Eventually, she is forced to leave her home in the mountains and sail back to England to live with her aunt on her father's side. The landscape of England looks foggy and cold when Aurora first sees it from the boat. Aurora's aunt has a country home called **Leigh Hall** in the middle of the dull landscape. She lives a quiet life, which she calls "virtuous," but Aurora feels that her aunt's boring lifestyle makes her like a caged bird. Aurora herself feels more like a wild bird forced into the cage too.

The cold, foggy landscape of England contrasts with the more beautiful and sunny landscape of Italy's mountains. Aurora's aunt is a more extreme version of her English father, who, unlike her aunt, knew how to overcome his reserved manner and heed his passions. Aurora describes her aunt's closed-off personality by comparing her to a caged bird, which suggests limited experiences and a lack of freedom. Leigh Hall is an impressive building, but to Aurora it is little more than a cage, providing an early example in the novel of how wealth doesn't lead to happiness and in some cases may even make people less happy.

Aurora's aunt rarely shows any sort of affection toward her. She comes to learn that while his aunt used to love Aurora's father in her way, she disliked Aurora's Florentine mother and saw her as leading her father astray. Being very Christian, Aurora's aunt feels she has a duty to take care of Aurora, but she remains cold and distant, perhaps because of the parts of Aurora that resemble her mother. Aurora tries to be a good and obedient child. She completes her studies well, learning French, German, algebra, geography, music, and the history of royal lineages around the world. Aside from this, the only **books** Aurora's aunt likes her to read are ones about proper behavior of women.

Aurora's aunt's inability to show affection is important, because one of the main things that Aurora learns over the course of the story is the importance of being able to love people on a personal level. In this context, Aurora's aunt is a warning sign of what Aurora herself might one day turn into if she doesn't open herself up to love. Aurora initially tries to please her aunt, and even many years after she leaves Leigh Hall, she will continue to struggle with learning how to love people. Although this poem celebrates the power of books, Aurora's aunt only likes books that give strict instructions for life, reflecting her personality and her narrow interests.

In addition to following her aunt's rules, Aurora also tries to please her aunt by being nice to her aunt's cousin, Romney Leigh, a young man a couple years older than Aurora who sometimes comes from his school to visit. One day, Aurora overhears her aunt and Romney gossiping about how Aurora is getting paler and will soon die. Like Aurora's aunt, Romney can be cold and reserved, but Aurora tries to befriend him because she has so few other options.

Romney's reserved personality and favored status with his aunt hint at how, like his aunt, he too struggles to feel passion and personal love. Aurora's pallor suggests that her homesickness and lack of affection are so severe that the deprivation has physical effects on her body. The fact that Romney is one of the few other people that Aurora meets while living in Leigh Hall is yet another sign of how wealth can have downsides, with big country manors encouraging isolation.

Aurora continues to miss the Italian landscape, which had tall mountains and green woods, while England only has "tamed" natural landscapes like parks. She tries to make the best of it, getting up early to see the sunrise. Her own room in **Leigh Hall** is full of green things, which she likes because it reminds her of nature. She begins to spend time alone reading **books** that don't necessarily benefit her, at least according to her aunt. She reads Greek and Latin, which her father taught her, and reading becomes a source of hope that helps her fill the gap in her life she's felt since her father died.

The green things in Aurora's room suggest that she is so far away from the grassy mountains of Italy that even an artificial reminder inside Leigh Hall is better than nothing. The strictly "tamed" landscape of England connects with Aurora's aunt's buttoned-up personality. The fact that even England's landscape is dreary suggests that English life in general is repressed. Perhaps for this reason, the books that most appeal to Aurora are set in Greece and Rome as well as in ancient times—all things that make these books an escape from modern English society.

Aurora reads **books** of various quality, believing that good intentions don't always lead to good books. She believes that "the world of books is still the world" and that God is in both. One day in a garret, Aurora finds cases with her father's name on them that turn out to be full of his old books. She starts with the first one she sees and begins to particularly cherish these books from her father's collection.

Particularly for someone like Aurora, who lives such a sheltered life, what happens in books can be as important as what happens in her life. Because Aurora lives such a repressed outer life with her aunt, she instead develops a vibrant inner life, which books help her to do. This perhaps relates to Aurora's strong religious beliefs, including the Christian belief that a person's soul is eternal while their outer body will pass away.

Aurora is particularly enthralled when she finds her father's poetry **books**. She feels that poets come as close to telling the truth of God as any human can. Aurora is so interested in poetry that she begins to write it herself, and her early efforts come freely without much self-analysis about what she writes. Later, when she looks back on this poetry, she will see it as a "lifeless" imitation of the work of better poets.

Poetry is a type of writing that often focuses on emotions—the opposite of the strict etiquette books that Aurora's aunt likes. Aurora's analysis of her own work reflects yet again how she is a slightly older and more mature narrator reflecting on a younger, more naïve self. Aurora doesn't understand poetry enough to see the flaws in her work when she begins, and yet in spite of Aurora's criticisms of her old poetry, this passage still has a nostalgic tone to it that suggests Aurora learned something valuable through her early efforts, even if they weren't great art.

Aurora becomes fascinated by the lives of poets like John Keats, Lord Byron, and Alexander Pope. Although Aurora's own poetry is still amateurish, people around her notice that something is changing inside her. Her aunt doesn't fully understand what's happening inside Aurora but clearly disapproves. She tries to get Aurora back on track to do her household chores. A divide forms between Aurora's outer life, where she's devoted to her aunt, and her inner life, where she is increasingly thinking about poetry.

John Keats, Lord Byron, and Alexander Pope were all poets whose public personas make up an important part of their legacy, especially since their poems sometimes included autobiographical elements. For Aurora, her goal is not only to become great at poetry but also to learn how to incorporate poetry into her life and live an interesting life like her poetic idols. The growing divide between Aurora's inner and outer life suggests that a person doesn't need to be a literary celebrity for poetry to shape their life.

Aurora learns to love England, realizing that as humble as the landscape is compared to Italy, it was still good enough for Shakespeare. She enjoys going out walking in the country with Romney and sometimes also his friend Vincent Carrington, a rising painter, but usually just the two of them alone. Aurora clarifies that she doesn't love Romney or even think of him as a particularly good friend, but they still find things to discuss. On these walks Aurora will point to beautiful things they see, like herds of cattle and full orchards, believing them to be evidence that God is watching over humanity.

Aurora's changing opinion about the English landscape shows how poetry has already begun to influence her ability to see the world, helping her to find value in England where she didn't before. Aurora's acceptance of England also seems to signify her coming to terms with her grief over her parents' death. For a while, Aurora tried to avoid this grief by being the type of niece her aunt wanted. But Aurora only truly found a way to get over her grief through poetry, which opens her up to her own feelings and helps her see hope in the future.

BOOK 2

Time passes and Aurora gets to be 20 years old, although she still doesn't feel complete as either a woman or an artist. She tries to reassure herself that many poets weren't fully appreciated until after their deaths. One day while Aurora is out walking with Romney, she makes a wreath out of ivy to wear on her head. Romney isn't amused and makes Aurora feel foolish. He hands her a **book** of poetry that he found down by the stream, which he noted has Greek written in feminine handwriting in the margins. He says the books seems to be full of witchcraft, so it must belong to Aurora.

Some of the poets Aurora mentioned reading earlier, including John Keats and Lord Byron, increased in fame and critical reputation after their deaths. The ivy wreath that Aurora puts on her head is a traditional symbol of poets that goes back to ancient times. Aurora's decision to put the wreath on herself may be premature, given how early she is in her poetic career, but it's also a sincere sign of how her own poetic work connects her to the poets of the past. The image is also important because poetry in Aurora's time was predominantly (although not exclusively) published by men, making Aurora's choice to crown herself a bold one.

Becoming a little less serious, Romney says that Aurora seems too busy being "a witch, a poet, a scholar, and the rest" to also be a woman. Aurora replies that by necessity all poets are men or women. She takes the wreath off her head but swings it about playfully as they walk. Romney doesn't notice she still has the wreath at first, but when he sees it, he tells her it's time to take life more seriously. He says that life for humans is no longer like it was in the Garden of Eden, and now people have to work for a living, having no time for idle thoughts.

Like his aunt, Romney believes that being a woman means fulfilling specific roles and duties in society. By contrast, Aurora believes that a woman can be anything, including a poet, suggesting that she does not believe in the same rigid gender roles. Aurora's decision to take the wreath off her head could suggest a willingness to repress part of herself for Romney's approval. Still, her playful swinging of the wreath by her side reflects how she hasn't abandoned her poetic dreams, just pushed them out of sight, reflecting the growing split between her external and internal lives.

Romney accuses Aurora and women in general of being irrational and cold-hearted, weeping over one sick child, but ignoring wider suffering. For this reason and others, he believes she'll never be a poet, saying that she pretends to be an artist in the same way that a child pretends to fight with a sword. He talks dismissively about how people like to honor female writers as an excuse to talk in self-congratulatory ways about the countries that produce these women writers.

Although Aurora portrays herself as naïve and still growing as a poet at this age, in this passage, it is Romney who comes across as even more immature. While Romney insults women for weeping over one sick child but ignoring wider suffering, by the end of the novel, he'll realize that learning to care for one person on a personal level can be even more important than pursuing abstract ideals of justice.

Aurora interrupts Romney. She says she knows her own limitations but would rather "pursue a frivolous trade by serious means than a sublime art frivolously." Romney agrees that Aurora's goals may be noble, but he talks about how the earth is corrupt, and how although previous generations claimed to be civilizing the world, they built civilization on "dead man's bones," making the result doomed to fail.

Aurora's awareness of her own limitations as a poet suggests growing maturity, as she begins to learn how her work differs from that of her idols. Although Romney continues to be condescending in his words to Aurora, he does bring up some points that Aurora can agree with—like the idea that "civilization" is not always a good thing, leading to the current repressed state of English society.

Aurora asks if Romney believes in God, and he says he does, but he sympathizes more with humanity than with God. He takes no comfort in the possibility of the afterlife, just as an extinct mastodon would take no comfort knowing that elephants still roam the earth. Romney's soul feels heavy when he thinks of how much humanity has suffered, and he doesn't think Aurora understands.

Aurora is a Christian, and the poem itself is full of Christian themes, including drawing a connection between nature's beauty and God's presence. This means that Romney's rejection of God is a further sign of his arrogance. While his goal of helping humanity has some basis in Christian ideas, his focus on earthly suffering and the material world (rather than the soul and the afterlife) suggests that his version of Christianity is short-sighted.

Aurora replies by saying she knows she is less experienced than Romney and that women in general seem younger than men of the same age. But she argues that a child can still say amen to a prayer made by a bishop, and she still believes she can understand the things Romney is saying to her, wanting to hear more. Romney surprises her by saying that what he really wants is for Aurora to marry him.

Aurora's feeling that women are younger than men of the same age reflects how English society has infantilized women, giving them less power and autonomy than men in the same circumstances. Aurora uses a religious example to show how young and inexperienced people can still contribute something valuable in God's eyes, suggesting that despite women's lower place in English society, they are just as important to God.

Aurora complains that if she's really as weak as Romney describes her, then it's inconsistent for him to also believe that she'd make a good wife. Romney says his words aren't contradictory, and his criticisms of her have nothing to do with his belief in her good qualities. He believes women aren't suited to art but are very well suited to "duty." Aurora says Romney doesn't really want a full woman as his wife, just a "helpmate" to aid him in achieving his own causes. She rejects his proposal.

This passage shows how even when confronted with his own contradictions and hypocrisy, Romney maintains that he's right. Being confronted only causes Romney to become more extreme in his belief that women have a specific, limited role to play in society. In turn, Aurora becomes more pointed in her criticism of Romney, showing how he only sees her as an extension of himself and his own life goals rather than as a full person with her own ideas. Aurora's rejection of Romney shows that in a marriage decision, she cares about things beyond just wealth (which Romney has), instead looking for a deeper connection.

Romney is disappointed and in a state of disbelief at first when Aurora rejects him. He says she still has the wrong idea and that he'll die without her love. But Aurora replies that Romney only sees women as a supplement to men, not as people with their own lives. She admits that she may not be ready yet to compose great works of poetry, but she believes there's something noble in the aspiration to create something great. She loves art and doesn't care if Romney approves or not.

Romney's inability to accept Aurora's rejection further shows how he has deluded himself. Rejecting Romney helps Aurora to become more confident in her decision to pursue poetry. In a novel where many characters consider securing a favorable marriage to be the most important goal in life, Aurora's decision to focus on her artistic goals is radical and demonstrates, radically for the time, that women can do things independently of men.

Later, Aurora will wonder what would've happened if she'd accepted Romney's proposal. Even at the time, she does admire some things about him, but looking back, she still doesn't regret any of her words to him, feeling certain that she and Romney don't love each other. After the failed proposal, Romney and Aurora finish their walk and make it back to **Leigh Hall**. Aurora's aunt invites them in, but Romney informs Aurora's aunt that Aurora has "dismissed" him from the property, and so he leaves. Her aunt thinks it was rude for Aurora to send him away, not knowing the reason, so Aurora explains his proposal.

Although Aurora sounded confident in her rejection of Romney in the previous sections, this passage shows how, in fact, she is more conflicted. Her thoughts now about not loving Romney take on a different meaning later in the story and perhaps reflect how even in spite of her discovery of poetry, she is still repressed at this point in the story and uncomfortable with romantic feelings. This once again shows how Aurora's internal life is more complicated than her external life. Romney continues not to see this internal side of Aurora, taking her rejection as absolute.

Aurora says to her aunt that Romney spoke to her condescendingly during his proposal and didn't seem to actually care about her. Her aunt accuses her of having too-high standards, believing that Romney is more than suitable for Aurora. She explains to Aurora that even though Aurora is her father's sole descendant, because Aurora isn't male, her family's money will actually go to Romney, leaving Aurora broke. Marrying Romney is the only way to keep the money. Vane Leigh, Romney's father, had been planning on Romney and Aurora's wedding since practically their births. Her aunt admits that Romney is a little idealistic with unrealistic ideas about how to improve the world, but she says this is only a minor flaw.

Like many characters in the novel, Aurora's aunt thinks of marriage in unromantic, practical terms. For her, it makes perfect sense for Aurora to marry Romney because otherwise Aurora will lose the family money. Furthermore, the marriage helps to fulfill tradition by carrying out the wishes of Romney's father. These reasons for marriage may make logical sense, but they have nothing to do with personal love, which Aurora—and the novel as a whole—argues is the essential element of any lasting partnership. Interestingly, even Aurora's aunt can see the flaws in her favorite relative, Romney, suggesting that she prioritizes different things than Aurora does.

Aurora insists that she's glad she rejected Romney, and her aunt accuses her of having a fever. Aurora tries to pacify her aunt, saying she believes God led her to reject Romney this morning and that it's for the best. Her aunt tells Aurora she's being foolish—she herself feels certain that Aurora loves Romney based on how she acts when he's around. Although Aurora blushes at this, she feels she doesn't do so out of love.

Although Aurora is generally both a sympathetic and a reliable narrator, this passage raises the question of whether or not she is being honest about her feelings toward Romney. Aurora's aunt, who lives alone in an isolated old house, may not be the best authority on love, but Aurora's blushing in response to the question of whether she loves Romney raises the possibility that perhaps she does love him and is still afraid to confront her feelings.

After her conversation with her aunt, Aurora grows sad, thinking of how her friendship with Romney has now come to an end. She figures that since she has rejected the help of people like Romney, she must learn to help herself. Later that day, Aurora receives a note from Romney where he apologizes if he spoke harshly earlier. In the note, he repeats his marriage offer. Aurora writes back a note replying that she isn't angry with Romney, but she still doesn't love him.

Just as Aurora seems to be softening her feelings toward Romney, Romney reveals that he learned nothing by trying the same proposal again. Aurora's decision to be independent can be interpreted as a feminist message, as Aurora shows that she doesn't need a man in her life to be subservient to. But it is also a sign of her continued repression and unwillingness to let other people into her life at this point.


The next few weeks pass quietly. Romney doesn't visit **Leigh Hall**, and Aurora's aunt doesn't scold her. Six weeks after Romney's proposal, Aurora is shocked one day to see her aunt sitting totally still in her usual chair, dead, holding an unopened letter, the contents of which no longer seem to matter.

In death, Aurora's aunt looks much the same way she did in life, paused in the middle of the everyday activity of opening a letter. This reflects how even when she was still alive, Aurora's aunt lived a lonely, isolated life that was a little bit like death.

Aurora sees Romney for the first time since his proposal at her aunt's funeral, and the meeting is cordial but awkward. At the reading of the will, Aurora learns that she's inherited all her aunt's money. It's not much, but more than she ever expected to inherit. Romney offers to also pay her an income, given that he has inherited Romney's father's fortune, which is considerably greater than the aunt's. He believes it's only the honorable thing for him to do.

The fact that Aurora doesn't inherit her father's money hints at the gender discrimination baked into English culture, making it more difficult for women like Aurora to have enough money to live, in turn making it harder for them to be independent. Although Romney offers to try to offset this injustice, he still does so in a paternalistic way to show off his own goodness, rather than for Aurora's sake alone.

Aurora turns down any money from Romney. She learns that in fact, the money that her aunt left her in her will was a gift from Romney, as a way to make it so the aunt was technically in possession of the money, leaving something for Aurora. Aurora asks when this transaction occurred, and Romney admits it was the day before the aunt's death. Aurora says she thinks this is the same letter she saw in her aunt's hand when she died—her aunt never actually read it. Aurora produces the letter and tears it up. Romney is shocked. After a few moments of silence, he asks Aurora what she'll do now.

Although Aurora needs money, her decision not to accept it from Romney shows that she doesn't want to be dependent on him. She tears up the letter in order to make it so she can't change her mind in the future. This dramatic gesture is a way for Aurora to demonstrate her confidence that she is strong enough to survive on her own without Romney's help or pity. Romney's attempts to help Aurora, while misguided and perhaps self-righteous, nevertheless hint at his realization of the ways in which society marginalizes women.

Aurora tells Romney she'll move to London. She wants to be a writer and either succeed or fail on her own terms. He wishes her the best, then says he supposes he will have to busy himself with his own work, which includes social causes like helping at orphanages. Aurora can tell he doesn't approve of her decision and is still judging her. They part, and several years pass.

As Book 2 ends, Aurora and Romney go off in different, seemingly opposite directions to find satisfaction in life. On the surface, Aurora's decision to pursue art and personal growth may seem like the opposite of Romney's goal to improve society on a larger scale. But ultimately, both Aurora and Romney have a similar experience of thinking they can find fulfillment in life without personal love, only to realize later that it's something they need in their lives.

BOOK 3

Aurora has achieved mild success as a writer in London, receiving letters from people who praise her writing and also give sometimes-contradictory criticism. Aurora also receives a letter from Vincent Carrington, a friend of Romney who writes about how Romney continues to be obsessed with social causes and trying to remake the world into a better place, while Carrington himself is content just to paint.

Aurora's progress in publishing follows a realistic path for a writer of that era. She describes her experiences with self-awareness about how insignificant her own place in the literary world is, at least at first. By contrast, Carrington does not seem to be as self-critical about his painting, perhaps reflecting how as a man, he doesn't feel the same scrutiny to reflect on himself and justify his profession.

Aurora rents a chamber up three flights of stairs in the Kensington area of London. She enjoys being able to work in solitude. Of her writing work, she says she has done "some excellent things indifferently,some bad things excellently," with both receiving praise but particularly the latter. Romney never writes to Aurora, and she feels that his silence must be a sign of disdain.

The urban environment of London is a sharp contrast from the country estate of Leigh Hall. Still, Aurora spends much of her time in isolation. While in one sense, Aurora's ability to make it on her own as a writer is a triumph, her solitary way of working shows how she continues to shut herself off from the rest of the world. The fact that Aurora gets the most praise for doing "bad things excellently" suggests that in spite of her successes, she still struggles to live up to her high ambitions as a writer to create something epic and original. It also suggests that the average public's literary taste isn't very discerning.

Aurora continues working, sometimes getting frustrated and tearing her poems up. People tell her she looks ill from working too much. Slowly, Aurora makes her way into London's literary world and learns its customs, writing less serious articles and stories to make an income to support her real passion of serious poetry.

Aurora's life as a writer continues to recall her life back at Leigh Hall, as she once again becomes pale and sickly from ill health. This suggests that even after escaping the oppressive conditions at Leigh Hall, there is still something important missing from Aurora's life.

One day, a woman with a very aristocratic voice called Lady Waldemar comes to visit Aurora. Aurora admits she is surprised to see the woman, since she wasn't expecting any visitors. Lady Waldemar assures Aurora she means no harm. She asks if Aurora is indeed the cousin of Romney. Aurora confirms this, then Lady Waldemar asks if Aurora loves him. Aurora says she only loves him as a cousin.

Lady Waldemar's sudden intrusion into Aurora's life is an early sign of how her character likes to meddle in the lives of others. Although Aurora denies loving Romney, she has also been hoping and waiting for a letter from him, once again raising the question of whether she is being honest about her feelings toward him.

Lady Waldemar says she'll speak directly: She herself is in love with Romney. Aurora tries to warn her that she's "no friend" for Lady Waldemar to make confessions to, but Lady Waldemar says she's willing to make a new friend. She explains that her first husband left her with a fair amount of money, and since she's still young, many people would like to marry her. She believes she'd be a fitting match for Romney. She says she knows that love is irrational and that perhaps she could find someone richer, but Romney is the one she wants. Aurora reassures her that she too believes in the power of love and that Lady Waldemar has no need to explain or apologize.

This passage parallels Romney's own proposal to Aurora. Just as Romney was a "sensible" choice for Aurora who couldn't imagine being rejected, Lady Waldemar takes the same condescending attitude toward Romney. Also similar to Romney, Lady Waldemar's actions are a bit presumptuous, as she acknowledges that her own love for Romney is illogical from the perspective of trying to find the "best" marriage prospect, but she doesn't consider the possibility that Romney's own feelings may be equally irrational.

Lady Waldemar asks for Aurora's help with her cousin Romney, but Aurora says it's up to Romney to make his own choice about a wife. Lady Waldemar tells Aurora that in fact, he has already done so and intends to marry a woman who is socially beneath him in just a week, which Aurora is surprised to learn. Lady Waldemar herself has tried everything she can to win over Romney herself, even getting involved with his social causes and signing petitions. Although he spoke appreciatively to Lady Waldemar, he went no further.

Lady Waldemar continues to show her condescending attitude, believing that Romney isn't fit to choose his own marriage partner. Lady Waldemar claims that her own interest in Romney is based on a strong and irrational love, but her selfish way of following this love makes it clear that she doesn't want an equal relationship and instead just wants to be able to dictate Romney's life.

Lady Waldemar goes on to tell Aurora how she teased Romney about his upcoming marriage one day. Waldemar told Romney she thought it was admirable for him to throw away his good family name for someone below him and that it was better for him to boast about the marriage instead of trying to hide it, because otherwise people might think there was something disreputable going on. This clearly rattled Romney, who asked Lady Waldemar if she knew Aurora. Lady Waldemar lied and said yes. She said she would go find Aurora, and the two of them would go together to see Marian Erle, the woman Romney's engaged to, in order to help end any gossip around the upcoming marriage.

Although Romney likes making outward signs of his own generosity, like marrying Marian, who is socially "beneath" him, this passage shows that he is not fully willing to leave behind the customs of upper-class society, still afraid of doing anything that might cause a scandal. Lady Waldemar's willingness to lie even about small things like knowing Aurora shows how she will stop at nothing to achieve her goals and doesn't care about her methods. This makes her very different from Aurora, who does things like refusing money from Romney solely on the principle of the matter.

Lady Waldemar's scheme got Romney to delay his marriage to Marian Erle by a month. In the present, after hearing all this, Aurora agrees to go see if Marian is worthy of Romney, but she warns Waldemar that Waldemar might get no benefit from this trip. Lady Waldemar replies that her only goal was to stall Romney's marriage and to have an occasion to meet Aurora, whom she can tell is influential with Romney.

Lady Waldemar clearly believes that she can manipulate Aurora to take her side, once again showing arrogance and seeming oblivious to the possibility that someone might not want her to marry Romney. A part of Lady Waldemar seems to be aware that Aurora is a potential rival, even if Aurora doesn't think of herself that way.

Aurora tells Lady Waldemar that she doesn't think Lady Waldemar's love for Romney is strong enough and that she should just go to the opera or something to try to cure it. Lady Waldemar says Aurora is harsh and that Waldemar would make a great wife for Romney to love. Aurora thinks Romney doesn't want anyone to love, just a woman to use to help him, like a horse. Lady Waldemar gives up and takes her leave of Aurora.

By suggesting that Lady Waldemar could cure her love for Romney simply by going to the opera, Aurora is suggesting that Lady Waldemar's love isn't particularly deep and would be easy to overcome. While Aurora's insult may be true, this passage also has the added layer that Aurora's feelings toward Romney are still ambiguous and she may be discouraging Lady Waldemar from pursuing Romney due to her own suppressed feelings toward him.

Unsure how to feel, Aurora goes on her own to the building where Marian Erle lives. There's a sick child out front, and Marian lives several floors up. Marian expects Romney and is surprised to see Aurora. Aurora assesses Marian, noting to herself that Marian is not particularly beautiful and looks childish. Marian tells her life story.

The poor state of Marian's building and the sick child out front help to establish that she comes from the lower class and lives an impoverished life, even compared to Aurora's own relatively sparse living arrangements. The childishness of Marian's features suggests that Romney is still looking to play a paternal, dominant role in marriage, instead of finding his equal.

Marian grew up in an illegally constructed house in a slum. Her father worked various odd jobs, eventually becoming a drover (livestock herder). He got drunk and yelled at his wife for not having more money for alcohol, and Marian's mother in turn treated Marian harshly, beating her. Marian learned how to cry quietly. Marian would creep out on her own to look at the open sky, which helped her to learn about God. At Sunday school, Marian befriended a girl named Rose, who, to Marian's amazement, laughed freely without being scolded or beaten by her mother. Marian later found out that this was because Rose's mother died six years ago, when Rose was just one year old.

Although Aurora had her own difficulties growing up, Marian's even worse situation shows how Aurora was lucky to have at least some time with a supportive mother and father. By contrast, Marian's early household was abusive, and her shy personality in the present seems to be a result of how her parents stifled her in the past. As a child, Marian thinks that her friend Rose is lucky that her mother doesn't beat her, only to learn that Rose has no mother at all. All of this hints at the extent of the suffering among the poor in England at this time.

Learning more at Sunday school only made it more difficult for Marian to live in her abusive home, where doing the right thing often led to punishment. Marian grew up without any **book** learning or knowledge of authors. She struggled at jobs, both outdoors and indoors work. One day, her mother tried to sell her into sex work by giving her to a squire, but she resisted and ran away until she couldn't anymore. Someone found her passed out in a ditch and took her to the hospital, where she had a bad fever for a while but eventually recovered due to her youthful energy. It was right before she was about to leave the hospital that Romney Leigh came one day. Seeing Marian, he took pity on her and asked about her situation. She said both her parents were "lost" to her, with her father drunk and her mother trying to lead her into evil.

Similar to Aurora, Marian's process of growing up involves becoming more religious. The difference is that while Aurora learned from books, Marian had no choice but to learn from observing the world around her. While Aurora had to learn how to be independent because her parents died, Marian had to become independent after realizing that her parents didn't have her best interests at heart. Although Marian and Aurora come from different circumstances, they each try to leave behind the traditions of the past to make their own way, giving them something in common.

Marian was entranced by Romney's tender way of speaking. He wanted to help her live a better life and helped encourage her growing interest in God. Eventually, he helped her to get a job sewing, where she worked vigorously as a way to try to show her worth to him.

Book 3 ends without answering the question of whether Marian and Romney's love is true. Certainly, Marian seems to feel real gratitude for the kindness that Romney shows her after everyone else in her life has treated her so poorly. Still, this passage shows Romney acting charitably toward Marian but not necessarily showing personal love, suggesting that perhaps he is still searching for marriage on the same flawed grounds that he showed when he originally proposed to Aurora.

BOOK 4

Marian continues telling Aurora about how she worked as a seamstress for about a year until the next time she saw Romney. A fellow seamstress named Lucy got sick, and Marian took it upon herself to try to nurse Lucy back to health, sitting by her bed and losing her own seamstress job. Lucy slowly faded away and eventually died. When a man came to collect the corpse, Marian realized suddenly that it was Romney. She silently vowed not to be parted from him again. She hoped Romney wouldn't be angry at her for leaving behind the job he arranged for her, but he started coming by often to visit.

The death of Lucy shows again how difficult life was for the lower classes in England at this time. Marian's decision to sacrifice her own job to help Lucy, in spite of how little Marian herself has, shows how Marian is a good and generous person. Marian's intense devotion to Romney could be a sign that, unlike Lady Waldemar, she loves Romney on a deeper level, but it could also be a sign that Marian just wants to be a "helpmate" partner to Romney, in the type of unequal relationship that Aurora rejected.

One day, Romney told Marian that he believes all people are equal and that class is a false idea to keep people apart. He felt that in spite of their class differences, Marian should be his wife. When Aurora interrupts to ask if Romney loves Marian, she says that he loves everything, which includes her. Aurora considers this and wonders to herself if what Romney feels for Marian really is love.

Marian's answer that Romney loves everything equally, not just her, is very revealing about his character. It suggests that Romney does not in fact have strong romantic feelings toward Marian and that maybe Marian can even sense this. And so, the question for Aurora becomes whether this type of affection is enough or whether Aurora should try to intervene in Romney's upcoming marriage.

Marian tells Aurora she feels more fit to be Romney's "handmaid" than his wife, but she's determined to do her best. Just then, Romney himself enters, surprised to see Aurora. She explains that Lady Waldemar sent her. The two of them speak amiably, but with a tension that Aurora notices. She tells Romney that she understands why he wants to marry Marian and wishes him well. Romney promises to live with his new wife as proudly as if she came from royalty.

Marian's feelings of unworthiness to be Romney's wife further show the inequality in their relationship. Romney's claims that he wants to live with his new wife proudly also have an ambiguous meaning. While he seems to be saying that he is proud of Marian, his wording could also unintentionally suggest that he is proud of himself for choosing Marian, once again showing how his charity efforts are also about making himself look good.

As Aurora leaves, Romney follows her. He says the area is dangerous and that he should walk with her for a while. They walk quietly, with Aurora still unable to decide how she feels about Romney and why he makes her uncomfortable even though she doesn't hate him. He takes her to her door and says goodnight.

Romney and Aurora's walk in this passage hints that even as Romney is about to marry Marian, Aurora and Romney may still have feelings for each other. This walk recalls Aurora's days living back at Leigh Hall and shows that as much as Aurora tries to reinvent herself in London, she still remains drawn to the past, particularly Romney.

A month passes. Aurora feels that her visit has helped justify Romney and Marian's match, while offering no help to Lady Waldemar, as least as far as Aurora can tell. Eventually the day of the wedding comes. The whole event is full of poor and sick people that Romney knows from his charity work. Aurora is moved by pity and filled with unease by these people, thinking the wedding feels more like a funeral. Aurora talks with the bridesmaids, who keep thinking they see Marian arriving, but it's not her.

The poor people at Romney's wedding give it a depressing mood, but in many ways, this seems to be a status symbol for Romney, who uses the wedding as an excuse to show off his own generosity. The fact that these people are the guests at Romney's wedding and not friends or family suggests that he has given himself over fully to his charity work, neglecting his personal relationships.

Aurora asks Romney's aristocratic but radical friend, Lord Howe, what's going on with the delay. He isn't sure but thinks that maybe Marian has lost her mind, just like Romney already has. Aurora can tell Lord Howe doesn't approve of Marian. Lord Howe admits this and says that Romney only likes to play at love, like an actor. All of a sudden, there's a murmur among the wedding crowd.

Lord Howe is sociable but has a mischievous streak, as shown by his willingness to gossip with Aurora about Romney and Marian's flaws. Lord Howe claims to have radical politics but still clearly looks down on Marian for being lower class, showing how he isn't serious about living out his ideals.

Romney reads a letter on the altar and gasps. He says there will be no marriage, so everyone should go home. But many in the wedding crowd don't believe his story. They believe Romney has tricked and taken advantage of Marian because she's poor, so they start to attack Romney. Aurora is so shocked by all this that she passes out.

Romney wanted to look righteous and charitable at his wedding, but instead, the guests turn on him and accuse him of being selfish. While the guests accuse Romney of something he didn't do, there is arguably something false at the core of the wedding, which was not based on mutual love.


Aurora wakes up and learns that Lord Howe helped get her out of the crowd. A couple hours later, Lord Howe brings Aurora the letter that Marian sent to Romney to be delivered at the wedding. It wishes Romney goodbye, saying that Marian isn't good enough for him. For days after reading the letter, Aurora tries to make sense of it and how Marian seems to love Romney but resists marrying him.

Romney wanted to find a woman to marry who was beneath him, but instead, he found a woman who felt so far beneath him that she refused to marry him. This irony further shows why in spite of his supposedly charitable ideals, Romney takes the wrong approach to marriage and seemingly doesn't know how to form connections with people on a personal level.



Romney searches for Marian, who has gone missing, for days, then weeks, with no luck. Aurora hints that it's possible Lady Waldemar intervened in some way to convince Marian to send that letter, but Romney doesn't want to hear it, saying that Lady Waldemar herself has been sick with worry ever since Marian disappeared. Romney admits that when he and Aurora argued so many years ago, she may have had a point: Aurora's decision to chase her dream as a poet in London has ruined no one else's life, while Romney's decision to do charity work hasn't changed much and may have even had unintended negative consequences for people like Marian.

Romney's decision to trust Lady Waldemar, who is clearly selfish and manipulative, shows once again how Romney uses bad judgment in personal relationships. Still, Romney also shows growth as a character as he admits that he judged Aurora too harshly all those years ago. The public embarrassment of his failed marriage forces Romney to reconsider his actions and realize that, while the goal of improving the world may be noble, there are flaws in Romney's approach to it.

Aurora tries to reassure Romney, saying that with the charity work he does, he is like the first nail holding together wood, which doesn't realize how important it is. Romney accepts the encouragement and in turn encourages Aurora to keep trying to make great art. They part ways, and Aurora has more respect for Romney than she did before.

This conversation between Aurora and Romney, which leaves each of them feeling more positive about the other, shows how each has grown as a character. Both of them have failed in their big youthful ambitions (for Aurora to become a poet and for Romney to change the world), but these failures haven't discouraged them and have helped them each to learn something about themselves.

BOOK 5

Time passes. Alone in her chamber, Aurora muses about art and how she doesn't feel she's succeeded in making anything great yet, but she's not afraid to fail. She writes a **book**-length pastoral poem but feels that it is only a superficially pretty work. Aurora believes it's still possible to write epic poetry, even though critics say this art form has died out. Though critics might think it's ridiculous to write heroic poetry about the present, Aurora figures that every age probably seemed commonplace to the people living through it. In fact, Aurora believes it's a poet's responsibility to represent their own age.

Aurora's interest in pastoral poetry (which is about nature) shows how she continues to carry around her memories of the Italian countryside, even as that part of her life becomes more distant in the past. Aurora's belief that it's possible to write epic poetry in the present could reflect the intentions of Aurora Leigh *itself—the poem takes place in more or less the time period it was written but has an epic length and style that recalls earlier eras.*

Aurora believes that a truly great poet, like any truly great artist, can't simply write with the goal of receiving praise. True art should do something to represent "the common man." Aurora is frustrated at how her own work seemingly fails to do this, and she wonders if past writers felt similar doubts. The work of trying to improve is solitary. Aurora feels that people should be satisfied with searching for God's truth but understands why so much of poetry is about searching for human love.

Once again, while Aurora Leigh is not an exact stand-in for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, many of Aurora's artistic goals in this passage reflect the goals of Aurora Leigh *as a whole. In this passage, Aurora writes of her belief that poems can express truth in a way that's more important than gaining approval from critics. Critics, after all, are human, and both Aurora and Barrett Browning write about religious themes, which transcend humanity.*

Aurora wonders who loves her, and she thinks of how much she misses her mother and father. She then begins to think of Romney, whom she hasn't seen now for two years. She hears that he's transformed **Leigh Hall** into a place to take care of the poor.

Although Aurora continues to resist the idea that she might love Romney, her thought process here (going from people who might love her to Romney) suggests that she still loves him in spite of how she sometimes resists the idea.

Aurora goes to a party at Lord Howe's, where he and his wife are gracious hosts, but something about the whole evening depresses Aurora. Lord Howe likes to speak at length on topics like justice and equality. Lady Waldemar is there, looking beautiful as usual. Aurora overhears a German student at the party gossiping that Romney is about to marry Lady Waldemar. Sir Blaise replies to the German student that it seems Romney has decided to pick someone from the opposite end of the social spectrum to Marian.

Lord Howe's party is a glimpse of the urban upper class, a group that Aurora has only met incidentally so far. Although Lord Howe is a gracious host, his approach to issues of justice is even more hypocritical than Romney's—Lord Howe just likes to talk about these issues at parties without taking action. The fact that Aurora first hears of Romney's potential marriage through Sir Blaise and the German student gossiping shows how important reputation and social status is in this group, with people's personal decisions like marriage becoming the subject of party conversation for others.

Sir Blaise and the young German student argue about the purpose of marriage. The student argues that a man like Romney would reject Venus herself if she didn't share his same principles, so this means that if he's marrying the beautiful Lady Waldemar, he must have done something to convert her to his righteous ideas. Sir Blaise finds this unlikely, believing that Romney prefers Lady Waldemar for superficial reasons in spite of himself.

Both Sir Blaise and the German student take a relatively superficial and male-centered view of marriage. Each tries to evaluate Lady Waldemar based on how easily Romney can make her fit with his ideals. They don't consider Lady Waldemar's perspective and seem to view even Romney as not having much agency, beholden to either his own principles or to Lady Waldemar's beauty.

Lord Howe approaches Aurora, saying he's been watching her for a while and she looks both calm and sad. He assures her that by talking to her, he's doing her a favor by preventing some boring guests at the party from coming to find her. He teases her by telling of a gentleman named John Eglinton whom he's heard has an interest in Aurora. In fact, Lord Howe has a letter from John to Aurora. Aurora protests before even opening the letter that she doesn't feel she's ready to love anyone at the moment.

Lord Howe continues to demonstrate that he doesn't take life seriously, as he teases Aurora and casually insults his other party guests. While Lord Howe's lack of seriousness can make him a charming host, it is also why he fails to live out his ambitious political ideals. The casual way that Lord Howe offers Aurora a letter from John Eglinton suggests that Lord Howe has no particular interest in what Aurora does with the letter and is simply interested in seeing what happens, reflecting the shallowness of life for the English upper class.

Lord Howe advises Aurora to at least read John Eglinton's letter. He says that compromise is necessary in life. Currently, Aurora works hard just to be poor, but if she married, she might have more time to devote to artistic work. But Aurora sees her virtue as being just as important as art—she will not compromise on anything that involves her soul, like marriage.

Like many characters in the novel, Lord Howe has a pragmatic view of marriage that focuses primarily on economic and social status. Unlike Lady Waldemar, he isn't manipulative and is simply suggesting that it would be pragmatic for Aurora to marry someone who can provide for her while she writes poetry.

Aurora gets up to leave Lord Howe, but he follows her. The two of them run into Lady Waldemar, who says she's been waiting for a chance to talk to Aurora all evening. She tells Aurora that she suspects Aurora had a soft spot for Marian, with a poet's sense of romance, but Lady Waldemar reassures Aurora that Romney never actually loved Marian. Aurora just listens until eventually Lord Howe interrupts, saying that Aurora is tired and must leave.

Lady Waldemar does all the talking in this conversation, not even letting Aurora say anything, showing again how Lady Waldemar doesn't listen to what others want. Although Lady Waldemar claims to have a true romance with Romney, her actions betray her and reveal that she hasn't changed her self-absorbed ways.

When Aurora is back home in her chamber, she wonders why it bothers her so much to see Romney about to marry Lady Waldemar. She knows it's logical that Romney should want a wife. Still, it saddens her to think of how quickly he has seemingly forgotten both her and Marian now that Lady Waldemar is around. Aurora supposes that Lady Waldemar is a good match for Romney if he's incapable of love, but if he is capable of love, then she thinks he doesn't truly love Lady Waldemar.

Aurora's thoughts continue to suggest that she loves Romney but is unwilling to admit it, even to herself. Aurora is also invested in Romney's fate because it relates to her own beliefs about romantic love and marriage. If Romney marries Lady Waldemar, the sensible choice in terms of money and status, it suggests that love is not enough to overcome other social pressures, and as a poet, Aurora wants to believe in love.

Aurora writes a short letter to Lady Waldemar, saying that although she didn't get to say it in person, she wants to congratulate Lady Waldemar on her engagement to Romney. Aurora second-guesses the letter, not wanting Lady Waldemar to actually reply to it, so she adds a post-script saying that Lady Waldemar shouldn't reply because Aurora is soon leaving England.

Aurora's letter to Lady Waldemar shows how Aurora continues to be conflicted. On the one hand, Aurora doesn't like Lady Waldemar, but on the other, a part of Aurora still wants to be accepted socially. The thought and second-guessing that Aurora puts into the letter shows how seriously she takes her writing, even in relatively small matters like a short letter.

Aurora has decided she must go back to her old home country of Italy, which she feels has been calling out to her all her life. She fears that she can only sell the manuscript of her long poem for a small amount of money, and the money won't be available for a while, so she'll have to also sell some of her father's **books** to finance the trip. Aurora feels that the combination of being home and Italy's rich literary history will help her with her own artistic endeavors.

Aurora's return to Italy is her attempt to leave behind the repressed culture of England, something that the sensible but seemingly passionless marriage of Lady Waldemar and Romney represents to her. Fittingly, even after his death, Aurora's father helps her stay connected to her past in Italy, as she sells some of his books to pay for the trip.

BOOK 6

Aurora spends time in Paris before making it to Italy. She knows the English sometimes call the French "light" as an insult, but she finds their idealism interesting and believes they're better at considering abstract questions than the English. She likes the city of Paris, finding it as beautiful even as Venice. She thinks of how humanity itself is great and a testament to God's power. Still, even as she thinks of philosophical topics, Romney and Marian sometimes unexpectedly enter her thoughts.

Like Italy, France represents a place where Aurora can escape from the repressed nature of English culture. Aurora tries to think of deep, philosophical topics, but she instead keeps coming back to personal topics, like her relationships with Romney and Marian. This is similar to how Romney himself focuses on changing the world in broad terms rather than his personal relationships. Aurora can see this trait as a flaw in Romney but has yet to realize that personal relationships are an important part of her life too.

One day, Aurora swears she sees Marian and rushes after her, but it turns out to be a different woman, who is startled. Aurora wonders whether Marian is even still alive. She continues to walk around Paris, noticing flowers and thinking of how Romney used to always give her yellow roses on her birthdays.

Aurora is going back to Italy for her poetry, but she continues to see reminders of her life in London, like Marian. As the daughter of an Italian mother and an English father, Aurora remains perpetually caught between these two worlds and trying to find a balance.

As Aurora keeps walking, she's once again certain she sees Marian and that Marian even looks back and recognizes her. Aurora is tempted to write to Romney and reassure him that Marian is OK. But when she follows Marian to learn more, she sees something surprising: Marian has a child with her. Aurora doesn't want to have to tell Romney about how Marian has a child. She wonders if perhaps Marian is just babysitting for a neighbor and resolves not to write to Romney until she learns the truth.

Although Aurora wants to challenge the roles the women can play in society, she judges Marian for apparently being an unwed mother. Initially, Aurora tries to pass off responsibility for her judgement, pretending that she is only worried about Marian's child for Romney's sake. But as the poem goes on, Aurora has to confront the idea that while she wants to challenge the roles women can play in society, her own ideas about women's roles are still restricted.

Aurora struggles to find any trace of Marian in the city again. One day, however, Aurora runs into her again by coincidence when Aurora can't sleep and goes out walking early. She hears a foreigner in the market struggling in French and confronts Marian. Marian admits her identity but is reluctant to talk with Aurora. For Romney's sake, however, Aurora insists on talking with Marian. Marian reluctantly agrees to let Aurora follow her.

Marian's inability to speak French marks her as an outsider, just like her status as an unmarried mother. Her inability to speak foreign languages also reflects her lower-class status and lack of access to traditional education. Although Aurora herself hasn't lived a luxurious life since leaving Leigh Hall, her ability to speak French is a sign of her different social class from Marian and the privileges it comes with.

Marian leads Aurora to a run-down part of the city. Marian has a chamber barely larger than a grave in a shoddy building. In the bed is a young child. Aurora admires the child, but asks if Marian had him legitimately, believing that if not, Marian is little more than a kidnapper. Marian says that indeed she "found" the child in the gutter. Aurora takes this to mean that after Marian abandoned Romney, she gave in to a seducer, and so Aurora scolds her.

Even Aurora, who is a relatively open-minded character, assumes the worst about Marian when she finds out that she has a child. This reflects how deep some prejudices against women run in society, and the remainder of the chapter shows why these prejudices are harmful and often don't reflect the truth.

Marian holds up her child and swears on his life that she only left to make things easier for Romney. She says she would not use the word "seduced" to describe her situation but "murdered," suggesting rape. Aurora apologizes to Marian for getting the wrong idea. Marian says that she was never on Romney's level, and things have only become worse now with the harsh way the world has treated her. Marian urges Aurora to just leave and pretend that she (Marian) is dead. Marian believes that Romney really loves Lady Waldemar and should be allowed to marry her in peace without learning about Marian's situation.

Marian's life, which began with abuse and tragedy, continues to go in dark directions, reflecting the challenges she faces both because she is a woman and because she comes from the lower class. After hearing Marian's story, Aurora learns how to look beyond her own prejudices. Marian's comparison of rape to murder shows how strong the moral codes around sexuality were at the time and how severe the consequences were for breaking them, even for victims like Marian.

Aurora thinks to herself that Marian is wrong to believe that Romney only cares about his charity work and that perhaps Marian also gave him joy, whether or not she realizes it. Marian goes on to say that she first began to distrust her relationship with Romney when Lady Waldemar started visiting, looking more beautiful each time she came. When they were alone, Lady Waldemar told Marian painful "truths," like how Romney would never truly be capable of loving someone like her. Marian comes to believe that Romney needs a wife on his same "level."

Although Aurora doesn't approve of Romney planning to marry Lady Waldemar, she has begun to think more favorably of him in other ways, particularly as she leaves London and begins to realize the things she misses about it. Although Marian initially describes Lady Waldemar as helpful, it is clear from her description that Lady Waldemar is actually being manipulative and taking advantage of both Marian's naivete and her lower-class status in order to get rid of her.

Marian obediently wrote a letter to Romney calling off the marriage, then went off with one of Lady Waldemar's maids to France. She didn't pay attention to where the maid was leading her, and she only realized it was a brothel after it was too late. This realization sent Marian into a state of madness that lasted for weeks. She left and began wandering the roads, accepting charity from peasants.

This passage shows how helpless Marian is, capable only of being led around by others. This is partially a result of Marian's low social status, which makes it easier for others to manipulate her, particularly the wealthy like Lady Waldemar. This passage illustrates how Lady Waldemar doesn't care who she has to hurt to get her way, particularly when the suffering happens out of her sight.

BOOK 7

Continuing her conversation with Aurora, Marian thinks there's no point thinking too much about Lady Waldemar's motives, which are like the roots to nettles. Marian eventually got taken in by a miller's wife for a few months. The miller's wife had an easy life, being beautiful and having a loyal lover in addition to her husband. But one day, her mood suddenly changed as she accused Marian of being "disreputable" because she was pregnant. She kicked Marian out. Aurora interrupts to point out that the woman had her own moral issues if she was keeping a lover, but Marian just says that people measure things in different ways, similar to the difference between measuring gold and meal.

The behavior of the miller's wife is hypocritical and shows how people hold women to a double standard. The miller's wife is being blatantly unfaithful to her husband, even telling Marian about her lover, but she throws Marian out of her house when she falsely believes that Marian herself has been promiscuous. This distinction highlights how people often hold others to a higher standard when it comes to rules about marriage and sex, while finding ways to justify their own behavior to themselves.

Marian went on to live with a kind seamstress who allowed Marian to sew with the other girls. After his birth, her son became the new focus of her life. Aurora is moved by all of this and invites Marian and her baby to join her on her trip to Italy. Marian doesn't answer with words but instead holds out her son for Aurora to kiss, showing her trust in Aurora. And so, she accepts Aurora's offer to come to Italy.

By inviting Marian to come with her to Italy, Aurora finally begins to let other people into her life. In turn, Marian responds to this gesture of trust with her own gesture of trust, by holding out her own child for Aurora to kiss. This offer turns Marian and Aurora into a temporary, nontraditional type of family and contrasts with the earlier occasion when Aurora rejected starting a family with Romney.

As Aurora prepares to go on to Italy, she thinks back to the day when Romney proposed to her. She thinks that if she had just accepted, she might have created a "nobler poem" than her own efforts at poetry, helping to save Romney and to prevent Marian's misfortunes. She weeps due to how weary she feels.

Earlier, Aurora felt certain that she made the right choice by rejecting Romney. Her more regretful tone now shows how she has learned to be more introspective, unlike other characters such as Lady Waldemar or the miller's wife, who aren't capable of seeing their past mistakes.

Aurora decides she'll write to Lord Howe that Marian is alive in Paris and has a child. She asks Lord Howe to convey to Romney only that Marian is alive and safe with Aurora. Aurora then begins a new letter to Lady Waldemar, where she writes that she's glad she never liked Lady Waldemar. She says she knows Lady Waldemar is evil but she won't say anything to reveal it, for Romney's sake. She hopes that Romney's inheritance is enough to make up for Lady Waldemar selling her soul. Writing the letter is cathartic for Aurora.

At Lord Howe's party and in her earlier letter to Lady Waldemar, Aurora held her tongue and tried to only speak according to the standards of politeness in English high society. Aurora's willingness to be more direct shows how she has become more confident in herself and perhaps already started to take on more of the passionate Italian side of herself that she has been repressing for so long.

The next day, Aurora, Marian, and her son all take a train toward Italy. They pass through several French cities, reaching Marseilles and taking an overnight ship to Italy. Aurora can't sleep on the ship, waiting for her first glimpse of Italy. They reach Genoa around daybreak, and seeing Italy immediately reminds Aurora of her father.

Dawn is a common symbol of new beginnings (as well as being associated with the Roman god Aurora), and here it symbolizes how Aurora begins a new phase of her life by returning to her old home of Italy. The long journey back to Italy from England symbolizes how much Aurora has changed from the girl she used to be, but her return trip shows how she wants to regain some of that old self.

Aurora finds a house in Florence for them all to stay at. They spend several quiet, peaceful weeks there. Eventually, Aurora receives a letter from Vincent Carrington. He writes that he sent the money from the sold manuscript to her in Paris and was surprised to get no reply at all. He tells her that the **book** has done surprisingly well, with critics who ignored her work in the past now talking about it. Vincent himself read the book about two weeks ago and loves it. He mentions that he will be married in a month to Kate Ward, a woman whose eyes he loves to paint. Kate has learned many of Aurora's poems by heart, and Vincent encourages Aurora to write back for her sake, if not for his.

By living in a house with Marian and her son, Aurora forms a new type of family unit. The closeness of the new family, combined with the Italian setting, make it the opposite of Aurora's experiences back in England at Leigh Hall. But this new happiness doesn't come at the expense of Aurora's poetic dreams—in fact, the opposite, as she receives news that her poems have been successful in England. Vincent Carrington's own life shows how personal love doesn't have to conflict with artistic goals, as he met his wife first by painting her.

Aurora is surprised by what Vincent Carrington wrote about her **book**'s success. She supposes the book was not as poor as she initially thought and might even have some truth in it. She knows that people like Romney look down on the artistic talents of women, and yet, she feels that truth is natural and difficult to deny. She marvels at how humans have the ability to be moved by nature in a way that a bird or a horse doesn't, believing that even the most commonplace bush is full of God. Aurora feels that good art is more than just imitation and contains something essentially human, which in turn makes it part of God's work.

Aurora learns that she may have been too hard on her own previous poetic work, now that it's found success in England. As the novel has shown, characters aren't always the best judges of themselves, and while sometimes they ignore their flaws (like Lady Waldemar), others like Aurora and Marian judge themselves too harshly. The connections that Aurora draws between religion and her poetic work help to explain why poetry is such an important part of her life.

The hot weather of Italy is getting to Aurora, suggesting that her mother's Italian blood alone is not enough to protect her from it. She decides to write back and briefly congratulate Vincent on his marriage to Kate. She wonders again about Romney and his decision to marry Lady Waldemar, but she decides that everyone sees by the light of the same sun, and so his view of Lady Waldemar is about as good as anyone's.

Aurora's inability to take the hot weather of Italy shows how her time in England has changed her and how a part of her has gotten used to the English landscape and lifestyle. Her continued thoughts about Romney and Lady Waldemar, for example, show how she can't let that old life go, even after moving to Italy to start a new phase of life.

Aurora marvels at the human capacity to reason, how humanity came up with the concept of humans and of seemingly simple concepts like circles and squares that other animals don't have any concept of. Time passes in Italy, and summer becomes fall. Aurora likes to watch the animals and insects, feeling a sense of fellowship. One day, she rides back toward the house in the mountains where she used to live with her father. But as she approaches, she can tell the house is different and doesn't want to have to confront the fact that her father is gone, so she turns around and rides back.

When Aurora goes back to see the old house where she lived with her father, she finds that it's different from how she remembers it, which sums up her feelings about returning to Italy as a whole. Aurora doesn't want to face this truth or be reminded of her old grief, so she turns away from the house. In this passage, it becomes clear that while Aurora's trip back to Italy is changing her, it also doesn't seem to be the solution to her problems and questions that she hoped for.

One evening near sunset, when Aurora is out walking on a bridge, she thinks she sees Sir Blaise. He seems to recognize her but hurries away and she does the same. Seeing him forces Aurora to think of England again, and from that day on, she struggles with writing her poetry.

The sudden appearance of Sir Blaise, or at least his lookalike, shows how parts of English life continue to intrude on Aurora while she's in Italy. Aurora's difficulties with her poetry suggest she is at a difficult moment in her life when she isn't sure what type of person she wants to become.

BOOK 8

One evening in Italy, Aurora sits alone with a **book** while Marian is in the garden below with her child, who is now old enough to stand and talk. As Aurora is lost in thought, she is surprised to hear the voice of Romney himself. Aurora greets him, confused about how she feels, and asks if Lady Waldemar is with him. Romney promises to explain and says he has a letter from Lady Waldemar to Aurora.

Just as Aurora turned to books when she was confused back at Leigh Hall, she does so again during her period of writer's block in Italy. And Marian's living situation becomes even more reminiscent of Leigh Hall when Romney himself stops by for a visit, just as he used to do from school. But if this chapter suggests a return to the past, it also provides an opportunity to highlight how both Aurora and Romney have changed as people since those days at Leigh Hall.

Romney references some news Aurora hasn't heard, but Aurora says she's already heard it in a letter from Vincent. She thinks he's talking about Vincent's marriage to Kate and says she thinks Vincent chose well. Romney isn't so sure, and Aurora wonders if, with the fickleness of many men before him, after marrying Lady Waldemar, he decided he preferred Kate. Romney asks if Aurora received a letter from Lord Howe about a month ago, but she says she didn't. Romney says that Sir Blaise, who it turns out didn't recognize Aurora when she saw him earlier, was supposed to give Aurora Lord Howe's letter, which would have explained everything about Romney's current visit.

In this passage, Aurora assumes the worst of Romney—that he has finally given in to the superficial lifestyle around him and into conventional ideas about favorable marriage by choosing Lady Waldemar. While Aurora has been correct in her harsh judgements of Romney and his condescending attitude earlier, she has also been misled by her first impressions, like when she thought Marian had a child due to promiscuity, raising the question of whether Romney has really become as superficial as he seems.

Romney says that if Aurora has already heard the news about him, he's surprised she isn't speaking with more pity. Aurora interprets this as meaning he wants pity for being Lady Waldemar's husband, so she remains unmoved. When Romney asks about Marian, Aurora says simply that she's doing well and has no intention of troubling Romney.

The conversation in this passage is based on a misunderstanding (that Romney has married Lady Waldemar), showing how Romney and Aurora still struggle to communicate, even after Aurora has come to Italy and tried to get in touch with her more passionate Italian side.

Romney then tells Aurora that he's read her **book**. Aurora is unimpressed, but Romney goes on about how deeply the book has moved him. He feels that the book is above him, full of knowledge of things he never considered. Romney recalls one morning when he and Aurora were talking about art before he proposed to her and says that now it's no longer morning but night. Aurora is reluctant to talk about that day, but Romney says that she was right for rejecting him then. He says he comes to her like a child who's been scolded and punished.

Romney's declaration that Aurora's book is above him is a sign of how he has begun to recognize and put aside his condescending and self-righteous tendencies from before. His words here show that he has started to learn both that Aurora has interesting things to say as a poet and also that women in general can succeed as poets. His acceptance of Aurora's rejection shows maturity, particularly compared to how indignant and in disbelief he was when Aurora first rejected him.

Romney says he used to be too wrapped up in his own dogmatic beliefs. He could hear the cries of all the needy in the world and got distracted trying to answer all of them. He realizes that his judgements of Aurora's artistic potential were unfair and that his own charity efforts aren't enough to change the world as he'd once hoped. Aurora says that although Romney may like her **book**, she feels that, like Romney, she too has failed to accomplish her goals in life, which may have been too ambitious. Still, Aurora maintains that while she has grown wiser and sadder in the time since rejecting Romney's proposal, she still thinks she made the correct decision.

Romney continues to show the ways that he's grown since the last time he saw Aurora. In particular, he's begun to let go of his messiah-like idea that it's his responsibility to change the world. He also expands on the idea that he was too quick to judge Aurora as a poet. Although Aurora does not necessarily show the same level of regret for her past actions, she uses a similar level of introspection and analysis as she considers how these past decisions led her to become the woman she currently is.

Romney says that Aurora's **book** has helped him better understand that June morning when Aurora rejected him. He says that her poems have long moved him in secret like sap in a tree, but this new book in particular helped unlock something in him. He realizes how he saw himself as trying to be a Christ-like figure saving the world, when in fact he should have been putting more faith in both God and other humans. He says he was arrogant. While Aurora agrees with Romney, she warns him not to make the same mistake by going too far in the other direction and totally giving up on his work. She believes that no honest attempt to carry out God's work is ever fully a failure.

Aurora developed her understanding of the world through reading books, and now Romney does something similar on a more personal level, as reading Aurora's book helps him to learn more about Aurora herself. Although Romney is right to criticize his past self for being self-righteous, instead of agreeing with him, Aurora tries to show understanding and compassion. This fits in with her Christian beliefs (where forgiveness is an important concept) as well as contrasting with the more forceful way Aurora rejected Romney during his first proposal.

Romney continues to criticize his past charity work, but Aurora encourages him not to speak so harshly of her cousin, whom she admires. But Romney says his attempts to convert **Leigh Hall** into a place for the poor were particularly fruitless. He tried to create a place where the poor could take shelter and eat food. But before long, peasants started breaking the windows because they didn't like the commotion Romney brought to the peaceful area. Rumors spread that Romney was trapping people in Leigh Hall like a prison. One day, people burned the whole house to the ground.

Romney's past attempts at charity were flawed, but this passage also highlights some of the external obstacles he faced. The peasants who destroyed windows just because they didn't like the noise of the new shelter are acting selfishly. Romney's attempts to be seen as a good person paradoxically backfire, with him getting accused of running a prison. The burning of Leigh Hall is like Romney getting attacked at Marian's wedding. While it's possible to blame both events on external factors, they also arguably come from Romney's own flaws, including how he always looked at the big picture without getting to know people on a personal level.

In his dreams, Romney sometimes still experiences the silent stillness after **Leigh Hall** burned down. He imagines Aurora could have turned the whole experience into a good poem and that perhaps she should visit the charred remains of the hall to get some inspiration. Aurora is moved but still doesn't want to get too familiar with Romney, believing he's married to Lady Waldemar.

Romney's ambitious charity effort failed, but it also had the positive effect of teaching Romney to be humbler. The burning of Leigh Hall also has significance for Aurora—just as her father's house in Italy was changed, now she also can't go back to where she lived in England, suggesting it's impossible to return to the past.

Romney says he's said what he intended to say and so it'll soon be time for him to go. Aurora says she's sorry for him but wishes him well on his travels. She says that Romney should hurry back to his wife, Lady Waldemar, who was never any friend of Aurora's, but Aurora has no intention of ruining his happiness. Romney is surprised by this. He says he never married Lady Waldemar and is shocked that Aurora even thinks this, given how well Aurora has understood other aspects of Romney's life. He holds out a letter from Lady Waldemar herself, which he promises will explain everything.

This chapter ends with the revelation that Romney has not in fact married Lady Waldemar, clearing up a misconception that was hanging over their whole conversation. By removing this misunderstanding, Aurora comes one step closer to truly connecting with Romney and vice versa. The fact that Romney isn't married sets up a question for the final chapter of whether Romney has changed enough since that June morning of his proposal to finally be a suitable match for Aurora.

BOOK 9

In her letter, Lady Waldemar writes to Aurora that she hopes Romney has successfully delivered her letter to Aurora. She says that she's never loved Aurora and believes that Aurora wrote a very ungracious letter to her earlier. Lady Waldemar writes that she learned Romney never really loved her when he got sick and she cared for him at his bedside for two weeks, only for him to hallucinate that Marian was taking care of him. At one point, Lady Waldemar read Aurora's **book** and found parts of it interesting but feels that it is doomed because women are fundamentally less suited for poetry than men.

Many characters in the novel grow and have chances to redeem themselves, but Lady Waldemar's letter suggests that she is still more or less her old self. One thing she's learned, from being near Romney during his illness, is that he didn't really love her, but she only reaches this conclusion resentfully. Furthermore, she still holds on to other beliefs, like the idea that women are naturally less good at poetry.

Lady Waldemar writes that she gave up on Romney and received Aurora's letter soon after. She admits that she sent Marian away with her maid, but says that the maid was someone she trusted highly and thought would take good care of Marian. Although things didn't turn out well for Marian, Lady Waldemar insists that that was never her intention and that Aurora's accusations against Lady Waldemar are unfair. Lady Waldemar bitterly wishes Aurora well, saying she hopes Romney marries Marian, since that seems to be so clearly what Aurora wants.

It's possible that Lady Waldemar's words in her letter are true and she really did have no intention of harming Marian. Still, even if so, Lady Waldemar's letter is still noteworthy for how she doesn't apologize or take responsibility for what happened to Marian, instead blaming it all on a maid. Her refusal to acknowledge her past flaws and misdeeds makes her different from Aurora and Romney, who grow as characters.

Aurora is stunned by Lady Waldemar's letter and its accusatory tone. Romney explains to her that it seems to him that in God's eyes he's married to Marian, and so he should also take her child as his own. Marian herself is nearby and responds in shock. She asks if what Romney says is true, and he repeats his offer to take her in and also care for her child. They turn to Aurora for an opinion.

Romney's offer to take Marian as his wife comes more seriously the second time, as he has grown and matured, gaining a better understanding of what marriage to Marian would mean. Nevertheless, he makes the offer as a way of keeping his word, rather than out of love for Marian, showing how in spite of all he's learned, he still sometimes puts love at a lower priority than his broader ideals.

Aurora hesitates at first, then says that if it's in her power, she freely gives Marian to Romney, believing he's more than strong enough to be her husband. She says that a union would honor both of them. Marian is so overwhelmed she begins to weep. She says first that she is grateful and finds it a great honor to receive this offer from a man like Romney. But she says that she has to refuse because she doesn't truly love Romney. She isn't sure if maybe she did once love him or if she only worshipped him back then. She wanted to serve Romney, not be his equal in love.

Similar to Romney, Aurora shows good intentions in this passage, but as she herself once said earlier, good intentions for writers don't always lead to good books. In this case, Aurora tries to do something charitable, but she still denies her own feelings for Romney, making her gracious manner a little dishonest. Marian, who has already taught Aurora about how to let other people into her life, does so once again in this passage by declaring that it isn't enough to marry someone just because you admire them—there has to be mutual love.

Marian continues, saying that as much as she'd love to find a father for her child, she will survive without one and needs to be true to herself. She hopes instead that Romney finds a noble wife who is his equal. She adds that she has long suspected Romney actually loves Aurora. With that, Marian leaves.

Marian's decision to survive with her child and no husband shows how she has grown as a character. Initially, she was powerless, whether at the hands of people like her parents or Lady Waldemar. Now, however, she has learned how to take responsibility not just for herself but for her child as well. This passage shows how in spite of the challenges women face, they are often resilient due to the struggles they've survived.

Romney and Aurora talk awkwardly. Romney admits that while he has tried to move on, he still loves Aurora and would happily accept her if she ever changed her mind. He also admits that his long period of illness was more severe than Lady Waldemar's letter hinted: he is in fact now blind due to it. He lost hope during this period of his illness, but now he says he is beginning to hope again. Aurora interrupts his speech to say that he hasn't given her a chance to say that, in fact, she loves him. Romney takes this for pity at first, but Aurora insists that she's sincere and that he must now listen to what she has to say.

Romney's blindness symbolizes how even when he still had his vision, there were many important things he didn't see. He was blind, for example, to how Lady Waldemar was out to trick him into marriage, at least initially. The fact that Romney has better clarity about his life after losing his sight reflects how in general the poem is more concerned with the characters' souls than their physical bodies.

Aurora says that while Romney was right to admit to his past wrongs, Aurora made mistakes in the past, too. She was trying to be a perfect artist, in spite of the fact that humans are naturally imperfect. She believes that, as important as art is, love is more important. She says that if Romney would take her love now, she'd be very happy—she says she's always loved him, even when she didn't admit it to anyone.

Aurora's declaration that personal love is more important than art is perhaps her most important realization in the novel. It does not, however, negate her poetic work—crucially, she has this revelation only after her work has become successful, and Romney's better understanding of Aurora was only possible because he read her book. The novel suggests that personal relationships don't have to compete with art but instead are a necessary foundation in an artist's life.

Romney's reply to Aurora is so dear to her that she hesitates even to write the words down for others to see. Instead of recounting his exact words, she describes the angelic way he spoke and the profound effect it had on her. She paraphrases him, saying that he admitted to loving her when they first met. He also made bold declarations and promises to always be faithful to her.

Aurora may be a poet but words fail her for part of this passage, as she struggles to write down Romney's declaration of love to her. This once again shows the limits of art and suggests that there is something about personal love and relationships that art can't fully capture.

Aurora marvels at what a beautiful night it is and embraces Romney after he's done speaking. The two of them agree to try to do God's work together—not just the type of charity work Romney was doing before but also the work of love and a relationship. Aurora believes that love will make the work of trying to improve the world easier and vice versa. Aurora takes Romney's hand in hers and begins describing the landscape around him that he can no longer see for himself.

The final passage of the novel shows how Aurora and Romney have managed to put aside their differences to build a relationship based on mutual understanding. Aurora again turns to her religious faith, contrasting Romney's earlier self-righteous charity work with a more sincere type of charity that starts with love and personal relationship instead of big ideals. The final image of Aurora describing the landscape to Romney shows how the two of them complement each other, with Aurora helping Romney to see the things he no longer can.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Gahr, Tim. "*Aurora Leigh*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Nov 2024. Web. 12 Nov 2024.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gahr, Tim. "*Aurora Leigh*." LitCharts LLC, November 12, 2024. Retrieved November 12, 2024. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/aurora-leigh.

To cite any of the quotes from *Aurora Leigh* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. Aurora Leigh. Oxford University Press. 2008.

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Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. Aurora Leigh. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008.